

PLUCK AND LUCK

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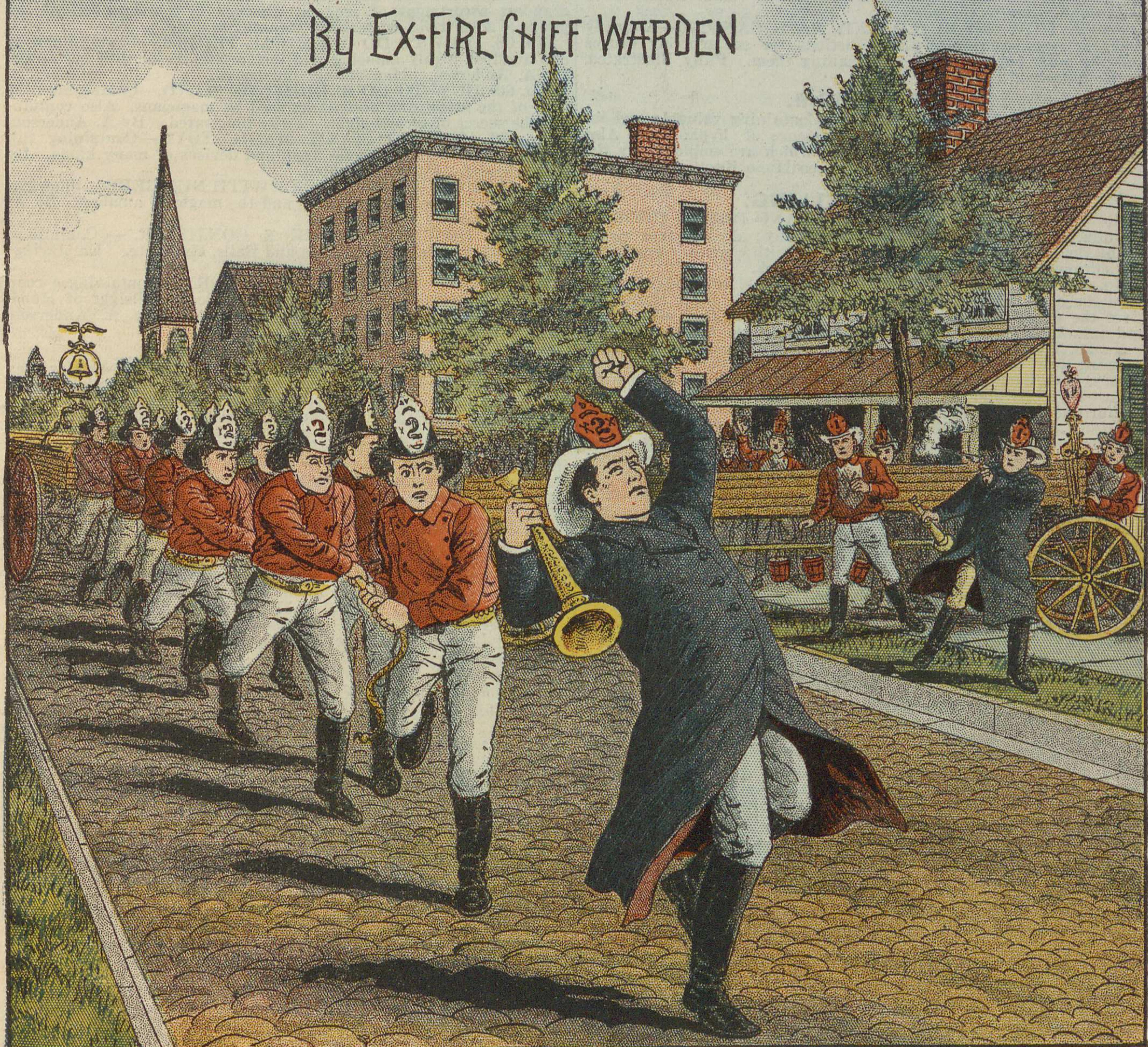
No. 228.

NEW YORK, OCTOBER 15, 1902.

Price 5 Cents.

HOOK AND LADDER N^o 2.

By EX-FIRE CHIEF WARDEN



Only one man saw Ashton snatch a revolver from his pocket. As the men sprang to right their truck, he who had started the fire at the hut saw Ashton aim carefully at the proud and manly figure of the foreman of No. 2. Crack! "Ha! that fixed him," said Ashton.

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NEW YORK, OCTOBER 15, 1902.

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SEP 1932

HOOK AND LADDER No. 2.

By Ex-Fire Chief Warden.

CHAPTER I.

AN ALARM OF FIRE.

Boom—boom—boom!

Fire—fire!

Boom—boom—boom!

Loudly pealed the brazen-throated alarm bell, breaking in upon the slumbers of the people of Eagleton.

Boom—boom—boom! telling that the scorching demon was at work.

Boom—boom—boom! telling perhaps of life in danger.

Boom—boom—boom! calling for help to stay the monster's course.

Windows went up hastily, nightcapped heads were protruded, and excited cries filled the night air as their owners saw the bright red glare which dispelled the darkness.

Then came the hurried tramp of feet, the rattle of wheels as the engines and the hook and ladder companies dashed toward the scene, each company uttering its own peculiar, inspiring cry, as they all swept onward, each eager to obtain the credit of being the first at the fire.

It was a tall wooden tenement on which the fiend had fastened its devouring, scorching breath, and from nearly every point bright flames were shooting upward.

It scarcely needed a second glance to know that the building was doomed, and that all the energy of the gallant fireboys must be directed to saving the buildings which adjoined.

The engines were nearly useless, for the nearest cistern was several blocks away. All depended on the two hook and ladder companies.

"Halt! Quick, boys—the ladders! Look to the hooks and axes! Tear down this shanty, and make a breach—the house on the other side is brick, and will stop the flames. That's it. Bravo—bravo! At it, boys, like tigers! Is every one out of the tenement?"

"Yes—yes!" was the answering cry of many voices, a cry believed a moment later by a pale-faced woman, clad only in her night garments, who had awakened from her sleep only when the flames were near to her. In a frenzy of terror she had fled, and only now did she remember that she had left her child behind.

"No—no!" she cried, in anguished tones. "All are not yet out—oh! my child—my child!"

Her agonized cry, her wild looks, caused a chill to creep into many a stout heart, and many a strong man shuddered when a second later a shrill, childish cry of terror drew their attention to a window on the upper floor. The room behind was a mass of flame, and in bold relief against the bright glare in the windows was a little girl of half-a-dozen years, clad in a little white night-dress.

"Mamma—mamma!" she cried, and stretched out her arms toward the crowd below.

"She must be saved!" said a man, in a tone hoarse with emotion, and other voices hoarse and trembling, cried: "Save her—save her!"

A dozen men were at the truck in an instant. The longest and stoutest ladder was snatched from its place. There was no need of orders, each knew what was to be done. The foot of the ladder was planked, and the slowly rising end reached the perpendicular, and then it was allowed to settle against the window. A shout of joy thrilled the crowd; but it was quickly succeeded by another of horror and dismay as a black cloud of smoke rolled through the window, and the child—strangled—uttered a tiny cry and then sank out of sight.

A puff of air held the smoke in check for a minute, then drove it back, and through the window they could see the mass of flames in the back part of the room. A single second this lasted, and then a jagged sheet of flame poured from the window.

"My child—my child—save my child," screamed the agonized mother.

But the brave boys recoiled from the ladder they had erected a few minutes before; they shrank aghast from the task—it would be almost certain death to face those flames.

An awful hush fell upon the crowd, and brave men turned pale as they looked at each other and shook their heads while they inwardly prayed:

"God be merciful to the little girl!"

But then came a hoarse murmur of suspense—of admiration, as a dark figure sprang upon the ladder and mounted swiftly toward the window.

With bated breath they watched the unknown hero, while the poor mother clutched at her beating heart and fastened her distending eyes on the daring fellow.

"Who is it?" whispered many, but none seemed to know.

Up—up—never pausing until the hot breath of the devouring flames was wafted into his face. Then they saw him pause to pull his hat down over his face, when again he swiftly mounted.

They saw his head plunged into the outwafted volume of smoke and flame, and a low murmur passed from lip to lip as they saw him rest his stomach on the sill and bend inward. They knew he was groping about for the child, who must be just inside the window.

"Great God! He will be burned to death! See! his coat is on fire. See the flames creeping down his back."

They saw one of his feet lifted from the rung. Was it the expression of pain, or was he about to descend? There was a moment of doubt, and then the foot sought the next rung below.

And then—a few rapid retreating steps—and the child was seen to be in his arms. Turning about, clutching the child in one arm, guiding himself with the other hand, he slid swiftly down the ladder instead of descending step by step.

Flinging the child into the arms of a man, the hero cast himself on the ground, back downward, to smother the flames.

"Turn the hose on me," he cried, and the next instant he was deluged, the engines having but that minute got the hose coupled and the water through it.

For two hours was the battle with the fire waged valiantly, and then it was subdued. The gallant firemen came off conquerors.

And when the morning light broke, the town rang with the name of the hero of that night—Ned Newcomb.

But who was Ned Newcomb? So many a one was compelled to ask.

"The son of old Sal Newcomb, the drunken hag who lives by the creek," was the answer.

When the whistle of the Eagleton Iron Works blew at seven o'clock Ned Newcomb presented himself at the office, and with a faint smile said that he was afraid he would have to lay off for a day or two.

"All right, my boy," was the hearty reply of Mr. Weaver, the president and heaviest stockholder in the iron company; "do not come back to work until you are able to do so. I am proud to number you among my employees, and your wages will run on as if you were in your place."

"Thank you, sir," was the modest reply.

"Were you badly burned?"

"Not very, sir," said Ned, with difficulty preventing a contraction of his brows from the pain he then suffered.

It was several weeks before Ned could go back to his work. Before this he had been shunned by most of the men, had been looked down upon, for Sal Newcomb was a drunkard, and bore a very poor character. But now this reserve was swept away, and the men spoke to him gladly, and as he was still weak, helped him with his work. From the despised and ostracized being he was now popular with them all, save one. And that one, Arthur Ashton, bookkeeper for the works, and son of one of the stockholders. He was also foreman of Hook and Ladder No. 2, and felt piqued that an outsider, a man whom the company would have scorned to admit to membership, had earned so much glory when they hung back in fear.

The rolling-mill stood close under a hill at the summit of which the ground stretched away for a long distance, a smooth, grassy level, dotted with trees and broken only by the smooth surfaced mill-pond, the water of which was conducted through a sluice and turned the large wheel in the mill.

At the opposite side of the pond was a lawn which reached to its edge, in the center of which stood the elegant mansion of Mr. Weaver. His only child, a daughter, Minnie by name, was accustomed to row about on this placid sheet of water.

One day Ned was sent up to the sluice to open the gate and

admit more water to the wheel. On the bank of the pond, only a short distance from the race, he saw Arthur Ashton beckoning to Minnie Weaver, who was sailing about in her tiny, brightly-painted boat.

"He ought not to call her so close to the race," thought Ned. "I doubt if she is strong enough should she get caught in the current, and the gate at the entrance of the flume was taken up yesterday for repairs."

But he dared not speak to Ashton warningly, and with a sigh he turned away.

Half way down the hill he was brought to a halt by a wild cry of alarm. In another second he was flying back up the hill, and he saw that what he had feared had really happened. Caught in the current that seethed and bubbled as it swiftly flowed through the sluice, Miss Weaver had been unable to manage the boat.

Arthur Ashton stood paralyzed by her danger. The poor frightened girl dropped her oars and was piteously begging him to save her.

One moment he paused to take in the scene, and then with bounds like those of a leopard, he sprang towards the gate. If he could shut this down in time she would be saved. The gate was close to Ashton, and had he thought of it he could have closed it with time to spare.

Trembling, agitated, Ned reached the gate when the boat was but a few feet distant and shooting swiftly towards it. It was one chance in a hundred.

Catching up a heavy sledge he swung it over his head, driving out the pin at one superhuman blow. There came a gurgling sound as the weighted gate sank into the water; then a thud, as the boat's bow struck the obstruction.

CHAPTER II.

A BITTER ENEMY.

Ned stooped down, and taking Miss Weaver by the hand, helped her from the boat. How beautiful she was, thought Ned, and how white and soft her hand was.

"Oh, sir," gasped the girl, not yet over her terrible fright, "how can I thank you enough?"

"I do not wish to be thanked," said Ned, and then turned to Ashton, who, now that the danger was over, was calm enough. He had called Ned by name.

"Just jump into the boat and take it from the race. I can take care of Miss Weaver."

Without a word Ned did as he was ordered; he saw Ashton lead the girl by a path skirting the pond to the big house on the other side. Then he lifted the gate again, and the water again danced swiftly on, gurgling and foaming, and the big wheel in the mill began turning again even as the workmen, puzzled at its sudden stoppage, were about to seek the cause.

"So you were the mear of saving my daughter's life, eh?"

Ned turned about as these words were uttered close beside him the next day, and saw that the speaker was Mr. Weaver.

"I'll never forget the obligation you have put me under," he said, warmly. "You will come up to my house this evening. My daughter wishes to see you and thank you."

"Excuse me, sir, but I'd rather not."

"Why not? Are you afraid of her?"

"No, sir. But—there's no disgrace in being poor, I hope!—I have no clothes fit to wear. These that I have on are all that I own in the whole world."

"Pshaw! what of that? She doesn't want to see your clothes, it's you yourself. I shall be displeased if you do not come."

This was said in a tone of command; it was his employer who said it, and Ned could not very well disobey.

So that night he timidly rang the doorbell of the big house, and was ushered into the elegant parlor. All the chairs seemed too fine to sit down on, and Ned remained standing until after Miss Weaver had entered. Then she forced him to sit down.

"Please don't thank me," said Ned, interrupting her a minute afterward, and his tone was so greatly distressed that she could not but see that her thanks gave him pain.

"At least you must let me reward you," she said, and would have placed in his hand a purse in which he could hear the clinking of gold pieces.

But he drew away with a shake of his head. "No, I could not accept pay for what I did."

"But you are poor."

"I earn enough to supply all my wants," he answered gently.

"But can I do nothing for you?"

She asked the question in an earnest and sincere tone. Ned looked intently at her a moment, and then he said:

"If you will not be angry with me, I would request of you a small keepsake."

She saw that his eyes were fastened on a slender hoop of gold on one of her fingers; instantly she took it off.

"Will this do?" she asked.

"Splendidly! Thank you!"

He would have withdrawn then had not her father detained him for ten minutes more, and then he left the place and hurried away to the tiny hut beside the creek, just beyond the village outskirts. Drunken hag though she was, Sal Newcomb sympathized with him deeply; and he loved her. She drank deeply, but he considered it an infirmity, a disease, not a fault, and pitied her where others despised her.

Ned Newcomb was happier than ever before in his life; and yet there was an uneasy feeling in his heart, for he knew that his bravery had gained him a bitter enemy—Arthur Ashton; whose wealth and position, and authority at the iron works made it possible to work injury to the poor and friendless son of old Sal Newcomb. But was he friendless now? Would not Mr. Weaver and his daughter be friendly to him?

It was the second monthly meeting night, since the fire, of Hook and Ladder No. 2. Ned had been heard to express a wish to join, and a friendly member had proposed him the meeting previous. And to-night they were to vote on his admission or rejection.

When the time came to ballot, Arthur Ashton arose and spoke harshly against Ned's admission to membership. Many of the company were employed at the iron works and dreaded Ashton's ill-will; these men generally voted as he wished. But their honest indignation was aroused when he belittled Ned's brave action at the fire, when he called old Sal a thing unfit to be named, when he called Ned a "low-born cur," and slandered him without right or reason.

Many among them had reason to know of Ned's goodness of heart. Had he not sat up night after night with Jim Dalton when he had the fever, and was likely to die? Had he not taken the places of many a one of them and done their work to give them an hour off?

Had Ashton merely asked them to refuse membership to Ned they would have voted as Ashton wished. But his abuse turned the scale, and Ned was unanimously elected, save for one dissenting vote—and that Arthur Ashton's.

When the result of the ballot was announced Ashton became livid with rage. They thought he would pour out his wrath on them. But he recovered his self-control, and asking the assistant foreman to take the chair, placed a note in his hands, and stalked out of the room.

On being opened the note was found to be Ashton's resignation from membership and his position as foreman of Hook and Ladder No. 2.

Arthur Ashton was from that hour a most bitter and unrelenting enemy to Ned Newcomb, a poor and friendless youth,

whom he, in his proud position in point of wealth and social standing, should not have deigned to bestow a thought upon. By hating Ned he only belittled himself.

Not long after the members of Hook and Ladder No. 2 learned that, as one of their number expressed it: "Ashton had gone over to the enemy." In other words, he had attached himself to Hook and Ladder No. 1. Between these two companies a generous rivalry had always existed, but when Ashton changed from one company to the other, the rivalry was destined to lose all its generous features. It became a bitter warfare instead.

No. 1 received Ashton with open arms. The truck was much older than No. 2, but Ashton's money soon made it brighter and smarter looking than No. 2. The latter, not to be outdone, voted a sum for repairs, and the appearance of the two companies, when they turned out on parade, was very nearly equal. The advantage, if any, was with No. 2, which, being more recently built was shaped and ironed off better.

"Wait until we have a fire," muttered Ashton. "We'll show the curs on No. 2 what men can do."

But when a fire did occur No. 2 was first on the ground and bore off the honors, or at least, Ned did for her.

On the first of the year there were elections in both companies, of foreman. Arthur Ashton was elected by the company of No. 1. Those of No. 2's company, employed in the Iron Works, had found that Ashton had too little power to discharge them without good cause, and fearing him no longer, and perhaps stimulated partly by a feeling of resentment toward Ashton, as well as admiration for Ned, the latter was elected foreman of No. 2.

Ashton fairly frothed at the mouth when he heard of Ned's election, and when they met for the first time afterward, Ashton bent on Ned a look of malignancy that could not be questioned. Ashton looked eagerly to catch Ned tripping, so that he might discharge him, but Ned was careful to give him no cause. They never spoke on any occasion, until the long winter had passed and spring had come once more.

Then words passed between them that were hot and angry.

Driving through the village one evening several boys had clung to the back of Ashton's carriage. He warned them off, but they clung on with boyish persistency until he stopped his horse, sprang from the wagon in a rage and began to ply his whip over their shoulders.

One took to his heels, but another—scarce six or seven years old—sank prone in the road, perfectly terror-stricken. Blinded to all the dictates of humanity by his rage, he cruelly struck the child again and again. A great livid welt arose on the child's face; again the whip swished through the air, striking the madly shrieking boy in the face and cutting the flesh. A stream of blood followed.

"Shame—shame!" a dozen voices cried.

"Brute!" exclaimed a clear, ringing voice, and Ned Newcomb interposed to save the boy from the upraised whip.

"You!" hissed Ashton. "Take it yourself, then!"

Lash! The whip struck Ned once, but not again. Like a tiger he was on Ashton; quick as a flash his fist took the coward between the eyes, and then the whip was wrested from his grasp and flung away.

"Now stand up like a man and defend yourself," cried Ned.

"Curse you!" howled Ashton. "I'll murder you for this."

As he spoke he rushed madly at Ned, who, unlike the other, was cool and collected. Up went his left arm to ward off the other's blow, then out shot his fist and Ashton got a clip under his chin which sent him headlong to the ground.

As soon as he could reach his feet he sprang at Ned, his eyes flaming, his lips drawn back like a snarling dog's, his teeth gritting. And again he measured his length on the road. He struck so heavily as to partially stun him, and arising half dazed, his friends had got him into the carriage before he re-

membered what had happened to him. Then it all came to him, and leaning out, he fastened his fast-closing eyes on Ned, and hissed:

"Curse you, I'll have your heart's blood for this!"

CHAPTER III.

DASTARDLY SCHEMES.

Ned Newcomb went toward his humble home with a very grave face that night. He now felt that he had aroused Ashton to that pitch of anger that he would spare no means of doing him harm. He was very sorry that this had all happened, and yet he knew in his heart that he had only done what was right, and what, under similar circumstances, he would quickly do again.

"What a brute Ashton must be to whip a child like that," he thought.

And if Ashton could be so brutal to the child, what could he not be toward him?

"I shall be discharged from the works soon," thought Ned. "He will now find some means to accomplish that."

In a momentary feeling of pride he thought he would discharge himself by not going to work in the morning. But he thought better of it, and when the whistle blew he was in his place.

Ashton did not put in an appearance for three days.

"They say he's got a handsome pair of black eyes," a friend of Ned's laughingly said to him. Ashton came back to his desk on the fourth day. His face still showed marks of punishment, as Ned saw by furtively glancing at Ashton as he passed near where he was working.

But his enemy never deigned to notice him, save by a slight scowl which he thought Ned did not see, followed by a meaning smile, that Ned felt portended ill to him in some way.

And it did.

Ashton had at first thought of having Ned arrested, but gave up the idea when he reflected that the boy's father would make a charge against him should he try to get square with the one who had protected the child.

Then he had set his wits to work to strike Ned some indirect blow, and he had accomplished it that day, as Ned afterward learned.

We have said that Ned pitied more than blamed his mother, regarding her dram-drinking as a disease. Taking this view of the case, he had arranged it so that she could get just a certain amount of liquor and no more.

Ashton knew this, and also that the poor woman could not resist the temptation were more liquor placed in her way. For a few dollars he found a willing tool, who carried liquor to Sal Newcomb and plied her with it until she was beastly drunk. The next step was to entice her into some public place and get her to shout and sing. This was accomplished with but little difficulty, and the constable—paid to be on hand—arrested the victim of this dirty conspiracy, took her before the justice, and in an hour she was lodged in jail as a common drunkard and a disturber of the peace.

It cut Ned to the quick when he heard this. It was the first time that Sal had ever been arrested, for she had never been seen drunk on the streets. Her debaucheries were known of but they took place in her own hut, and none but Ned's eyes saw her on such occasions.

Somehow he attributed this to the machinations of his enemy, yet could not be positive that such was the case. Yet he was morally sure of the truth of his suspicions when the Eagle-ton News, published once a week, came out, containing a highly

colored account of Sal's drunkenness, and alluding to him as a worthy descendant.

"He had a hand in writing this," muttered Ned, compressing his lips.

This newspaper article nettled him very much. His bravery had won golden words for him, and his connection with Sal had sunk somewhat into the background; but now it was brought prominently forth, and he was sensible enough to see that the disgraceful relationship could not but throw a shadow on him.

After reading the article a second time, a look of doubt, pain, and indecision rested for some time on his face. Then he muttered:

"No, Sal, I'll be faithful to you to the end, even as you were faithful and kind to me as babe, child, and grown boy. Many condemn you, cover you with obloquy which I could escape by telling the truth—that I am not your son, nor any relation to you. But no, you were kind to me when others deserted me; in many ways you took the place of a mother, and come what may I'll be true to you."

Heroic Ned!

Few there are who, no matter how strong the obligation, would have willingly allowed himself to be considered the son of such a woman. He possessed more true affection for this drunken woman, honored her more than Arthur Ashton did his real mother.

Such is life! Wealth may enable a man to dress better, to eat his food off of finer china; may enable him to tickle his palate with dainty viands; but the one thing it cannot purchase is a good, true, noble heart.

Which was the true gentleman, Ashton or Ned?

Sal had been sentenced for a month, and during this time Ned would be compelled to live alone in the lonely hut, to cook his own breakfast before going to work, and to prepare supper on his return.

Two weeks had glided away.

One day Ned caught Ashton's eyes fixed on him; they burned with a vengeful light, and as he turned away Ned again saw that same peculiar smile as on the day when Sal had been arrested.

"More trouble!" thought Ned.

And he was right.

"As he sauntered through the village that evening Arthur Ashton and another watched him.

"Now's your time," said Ashton at last. "Be careful, but be sure."

The fellow looked terribly pale, but setting his lips resolutely he hurried away, never slackening his speed until he stood at the door of the hut.

He had a key for the door, opening which he entered the hut, took a small vial from his pocket and flung half its contents on Ned's bed and the rest around the floor.

It was chloroform!

What did it mean? In a few minutes we shall see.

Going to the rear of the hut he proceeded to pile up against it a lot of dry twigs and other inflammable material. When he had arranged it all to his satisfaction he withdrew a short distance and laid in wait for the coming of Ned.

The whole hellish scheme was plain now.

When Ned had become stupefied by the chloroform, it was his intention to set fire to the hut.

All unconscious of the terrible plot against his life, Ned drew near the hut, softly whistling a popular air.

Flinging open the door of the hut, he entered, and pausing quickly, began to sniff the air.

"How close it smells! I wonder what that peculiar odor is?"

Ten minutes later a dark figure crept up to the ready pile. A match was carefully lighted and thrust into the tinder-like stuff; there was a moment's pause, to be sure that it would all

ignite, and then the villain hurried swiftly and silently away.

"Fire—fire!"

Once more the wild alarm rang through the streets of Eagle-ton.

Almost simultaneously two sheets of flame were seen shooting up into the night air, one from the burning hut, the other from the opposite side of the town.

"Fire—fire!"

Out came the engines.

Which way should they go?

"This way, boys—this way!" shouted Ashton, feverishly. "That's only an old shanty. This way—this way—stand by the machine—hurrah—we're off. No. 1 forever. Now, boys, to make No. 2's men hide their heads beneath their wings! Hurrah! Stand by! Forward!"

Away they dashed, Ashton and his companion of the early evening in advance.

"Is it all fixed?" said Ashton, with face paling as he spoke.

"Yes."

"You are sure of it?"

"Dead sure. I saw him go in. Two minutes in there would do the biz. The fire, you can see for yourself, is burning all right."

A fiendish smile of triumph, of demon-like satisfaction, crossed Ashton's face. Then he pricked up his ears. He heard the sound of rattling wheels. No. 2 was coming down a street crossing at right angles with the one they were in.

"Hurrah!—Hurrah, boys, here comes No. 2. On—on—run for it or they'll beat us yet," and flourishing his trumpet he led them on, crowding toward the upper side of the street.

"Hip—hip—hurrah!" yelled the excited voice of one of No. 2's men, as he reached the corner and saw that the advantage was with his company. "One good break, boys, and we've got 'em!"

"Wake up there!" shouted Ashton through his trumpet to his men. "Lively—lively—or the suckers will beat us!"

No. 1's men responded bravely, and burst into great speed. Would they fetch it? Ashton glanced toward No. 2—and every particle of color forsook his cheek as his eyes alighted on Ned Newcomb, waving his trumpet and shouting encouragement to his men.

No. 1 reached the corner first. But Ashton was struck all of a heap, as the saying goes, and could not retain the advantage he had gained.

"Out of the way!" yelled Ned. "Sweep 'em aside, my lads. Hurrah for No. 2."

On swept Hook and Ladder No. 2, and struck the rival company like a thunderbolt. The truck was swept across the street and stranded on the sidewalk, and away rattled No. 2, every man of the company uttered shouts of victory, or laughing over the discomfiture of their rivals.

Only one man saw Ashton snatch a revolver from his pocket. As the men sprang to right their truck, he who had started the fire at the hut saw Ashton aim carefully at the proud and manly figure of the foreman of No. 2.

Crack!

"Ha! he staggers!" said Ashton, hastily concealing his weapon. "Curse him, that fixed him!"

CHAPTER IV.

AT THE FIRE.

Passion in a human being, when it gets beyond control, is a dreadful thing. Thus, Arthur Ashton, who not long before would have shuddered at the thought of murder, had, on this

one night, made two attempts on the life of Ned Newcomb, and it was not his fault that both were unsuccessful.

Jim Murdock, Ashton's tool, who had set fire to Ned's cottage, supposed that the young fellow had perished in the flames.

But not so, as the reader knows.

Ned had been struck by the strange odor he found in the hut when he entered. He had never smelt chloroform before, and knew not the character of the odor, although he was aware that it was very disagreeable and had a strangely suffocating effect.

He left the door open, that the air of the room might be freshened. Finding this did not occur, and that his head was beginning to feel remarkably heavy, he put on the garments he had already taken off and went outdoors.

Murdock, at that moment, was as the rear of the hut, and so greatly engrossed as not to hear Ned's movements, and did not observe him when he struck off toward the village; he had left the door open, intending to return in half an hour, by which time the strange odor would be dissipated.

When near the village he heard the alarm of fire.

In an instant everything else was forgotten, and away he dashed at the top of his speed. The boys were just hauling out the truck when he reached the house, and snatching the trumpet from its hook he dashed away in the lead, meeting No. 1, as already described.

Accident had saved his life once that night, and it was destined to do so again. His foot struck an obstruction and nearly flung him to the ground, and the would-be assassin's bullet failed in its bloody mission.

This was the staggering observed by Ashton which had led him to believe that his bullet had done its work.

"Curse him," hissed Ashton. "That fixed him."

"Wrong," added Murdock hastily. "See! He's running as stiff as ever."

Ashton gnashed his teeth with rage, and then glanced quickly toward his men. They were too busy, and there was too much bustle and confusion for them to have noticed the crack of the revolver; if any noticed it it was speedily forgotten in the excitement.

Ashton sprang toward them and assisted them in righting and clearing the truck.

"Forward!" he then yelled through his trumpet. "And remember, boys, that we've got it in for No. 2."

"Ay—ay!" was the grim response from every lip, and every face wore a look of savage determination and vengeful anger.

Away they dashed in the wake of No. 2, now already on the scene of the fire.

It was a stable connected with the residence of one of Eagle-ton's wealthiest men. It was already all ablaze. The horses, among them one of great value, had not yet been got out, and their loud stamping was plainly heard, as well as their almost human shrieks of anguish and terror.

As is frequently the case at country fires, the water supply is so located that much time is consumed before a stream of water can be turned upon the flames, and the brunt of the fight with the fiend falls upon the gallant hook and ladder boys.

So it was now.

"Halt!" came the clarion-voiced trumpet command. "Poles—hooks—and axes! Break in the stable door! Good Heaven!—it's frightful to listen to the shrieks of those animals."

Axes and hooks are seized.

In an instant the wooden fence had disappeared.

Then—crash—crash—crash—as sturdy blows were showered upon the stable door.

The flames were creeping nearer—the gallant fellows could barely stand the heat.

Crash—crash—crash!

The stamping and pawing inside became more fierce.

The wild neighing of the terror-stricken animals was heart-rending.

Crash—crash—crash!

A long shout of defiance, and No. 1 was on the spot.

Ashton's lurid eyes flashed over the scene. He took his cue from the actions of No. 2's men.

"All hands to the axes!" he ordered. "Attack the stable door, and show these beggars how men work, and"—in a lower voice he added—"sweep away all opposition! Now is the time to wipe out your disgrace!"

Feeling ran high between the two companies, and the men glared savagely at each other.

No. 1's men, armed with axes, sprang towards the stable door. Ned saw them coming and instinctively knew that their design was rather to pick a quarrel than to save the perishing animals.

"Keep your temper, boys," he said, in a low tone. "Don't let them draw you into a fight if you can avoid it."

A burly fellow named Larry Logan was the first one of No. 1's men to reach the door. He shoved one of No. 2's men aside with an oath and the remark:

"It needs a man for a man's work. Out of the way, you shrimp!"

The plucky fellow would have contested the place but for a sign from Ned. A sudden idea had occurred to the latter. The door was heavy and strong, much more so than usual. It struck him to make a breach through the side of the stable where there was a thickness only of one inch pine boards.

Ned called a few of his men off, and in less than two minutes a breach was made in the side of the barn big enough to permit the egress of the horses.

"Follow me," cried Ned, springing into the burning building.

The upper story was one mass of flame. The floor had burned through in spots, and through the holes small bunches of blazing hay were continually falling, some upon the horses, who danced and neighed more madly than ever, and some upon the hands and arms of the gallant rescuing party.

Off came Ned's coat, which he flung over the head of the nearest horse, who, being thus blindfolded, allowed himself to be led out. Poor brute! He was trembling all over, and once outside, staggered rather than walked.

Crash—crash—crash!

Away went the door at last, and with a wild shout No. 1's men prepared to dash into the stable. Then came a cry of mingled disgust and chagrin at sight of the last of the horses just being led out through the breach.

Ned's lips parted with a quiet smile of triumph. He understood human nature well enough to know that this chagrined his rivals more than if they had been met in combat and driven back from the door. Logan was the first one to discover what had happened, and an oath escaped from his lips as he exclaimed:

"It'll never do not to take at least one horse through this door. Come on, boys—come on!"

Into the stable he dashed, and seized hold of the tail of the horse now half out—half in—the building. Half a dozen now joined him in the effort to drag the horse back, and half a dozen others rushed around the building to assist from the other side.

Ned saw what they were up to.

Catching up a stout stick he sprang into the stable and struck the animal a sudden blow on the rump. Startled and in pain, the horse gave a sudden bound and went clean through the breach, dragging with him the men of No. 1 who still clung to his tail.

"Hurrah for No. 2!" shouted an enthusiastic looker-on, and the cheer came with a vengeance. It was gall and wormwood to No. 1's men, and they howled in their anger.

Logan, who was a big brute, and nothing else, was so enraged that he knocked down the assistant foreman of No. 2, Joe Porter by name.

Quick as a flash a line of battle was formed. The maddened men on both sides, their faces made almost fiendish-looking by the red glare playing on them, swung their axes about their heads with fury in every gesture.

In a moment blood—and much of it—must have flown, had not a lithe figure glided between the lines. It was Ned Newcomb. His eyes flashed, his figure was proudly erect, his voice clear and firm as the notes of the church bell.

"Stop where you are," he ordered. "Down with your axes—drop them, I say! Do you hear, No. 2? As for these cowards belonging to No. 1, let me give you a bit of advice—save your energy for the next fire! Back—back, I say!" whirling his trumpet above his head. "Keep back—I'll brain the first man who advances!"

CHAPTER V.

FOURTH OF JULY GAMES.

Arthur Ashton, with a view to saving his own bones, stood some little distance away, watching the course of events. A look of joy came into his face as he saw Ned Newcomb standing alone before the men of No. 1, with only his trumpet as a defensive weapon, for Garry Logan was a regular bruiser, and he had no doubt would wreak summary vengeance on Ned for his audacity in facing them single-handed.

It is more than probable that had Ned faced Garry alone, the latter would have been down on him with the fury of a whirlwind. But there was something so magnificent, so lion-like in this young fellow's facing the whole lot of them, after making his own backers lay down their weapons, that he was astounded, and he allowed the ax he himself wielded to fall to the ground.

By the time his astonishment was over his passion had given place to a glimmering of reason. With such terrible weapons, a fight meant death to more than one, death which the law might think unjustifiable, and punish accordingly.

These reflections decided him.

"Haul off, boys," he said in a grumbling tone. "We must get square another time."

It was a brave action on Ned's part. More than one member of those rival companies owed their lives to him.

Ned now turned his attention to the building again. Everything in it that lived and breathed had been rescued, but a single glance showed him that the structure itself was doomed.

By this time the tardy engines were ready for work, but beyond wetting down the nearest buildings to prevent the extending of the conflagration they could do nothing.

When the danger was all past, Ned ordered a return to their house. On the way there he learned for the first time that simultaneously with the breaking out of the flames at the barn, his own little habitation had been attacked by the same fiend.

When he had heard the cry of fire his back was toward the hut, and seeing the reflection in his face of the fire on the other side of the village, he had not turned to look behind him. Nor did he know that an enemy's bullet would have that night robbed him of life only for his having stumbled.

"Do you know, Ned, it's rather singular that these two fires should have broken out at precisely the same time," said Joe Porter, walking beside Ned on their return to the truck-house.

But Ned made no reply.

He was buried in thought.

He was thinking of the singular odor which had caused him to leave the hut. Perhaps if that had not driven him forth he

might have been burned to death as he slept! So he thought. But what could the odor have been? Ha! It had produced a sleepy feeling—could it be possible? Why had Ashton seemed aghast at sight of him?

Ned had obtained a glimmering of the truth, but he thrust it from him with horror. No—no—he could not, would not, suspect any human being of such fiendishness.

"Won't you go home with me, Ned?" asked Joe Porter, when, having discussed the fire at some length, the members of the company had gathered outside of the door of the house.

"I must go over to the hut, or rather what is left of it," said Ned sadly, for humble as it was, it had been his home for so long that it was endeared to him.

"I'll keep you company if you will go home with me afterward," said Joe earnestly.

Ned flushed; but he was truth and honesty to his heart's core, and not ashamed to speak right out.

"It is a fact, Joe, that I am the foreman and you my subordinate in the company, but beyond that the cases are reversed. You are the son of Mr. Porter, one of the grandees of Eagleton, have a proud father, mother, sisters, who cannot do otherwise than ignore the son of Sal Newcomb—drunken Sal Newcomb, as I hear she is more frequently called. No, Joe, God bless you for your own friendship to me, but I cannot go home with you; believe me it would only result in your family lecturing you for your poor taste in making a companion of me."

"You speak bitterly, Ned, and are unjust to my family. They may be proud, Ned, but it is not stinking pride, that kind which judges every acquaintance by the depth of his pocket. To be honest, Ned, we had a family discussion about you not long ago, and my father said he would rather see me in your company any time than in that of even Arthur Ashton, whose family, you know, hold their heads mighty high. Will you not go and spend the night with me?"

Ned's cheeks glowed with honest joy at the thought that Mr. Porter had so spoken of him.

Joe went with him to view the still smoking ruins of the hut, and then Ned went home with him.

Ned had to get his breakfast about half-past six. The Porter family usually breakfasted at eight, and Ned did not expect to see them. But they all came down early that morning, and ate with the gallant hero of last night.

They were all exceedingly kind. Mr. Porter shook him by the hand, Mrs. Porter poured out his coffee and waited on him, and the two sisters were even frank and cordial.

And when the Eagleton paper came out that week it spoke of him in glowing terms.

It was said that the fire could only be accounted for by supposing it to be the work of an incendiary.

"Just my own conclusion," thought Ned. "And the hut was set fire to by somebody. It couldn't have been an accident, because not a spark of fire was in it during the evening."

There had been a time when Ned Newcomb walked the streets of Eagleton with bowed head, humiliated by the feeling that he was looked down upon by all. But now it was different. He held his head up and looked passers-by in the face. He could count among his friends the Weavers and the Porters; that was the secret of this change in his feeling.

Let it not be supposed that he had become puffed up, or arrogant, or haughty. No, he merely had learned that he was respected, and consequently was self-respecting.

Had he been puffed up he would not have done what he did only a short time later. That was to go, when old Sal Newcomb's time was up, and escort her from the jail to the tiny cottage he had rented in the outskirts of Eagleton.

His face expressed no feeling of shame at being seen in her company; he took no by-ways that he might not be seen; he faced proudly all who passed, and his manner plainly said: "Those who slur this woman I do not care to know."

She had heard while in jail of the performances of Ned, and knew that he had reason to be proud. She had feared that he would now avoid her, and his not doing so aroused every good impulse in her heart.

"God bless you, Ned," she said that night. "I have been without liquor since that disgraceful day, and for your sake—with God's help—I'll never touch another drop."

It was a bitter struggle, but the woman's pride and love were both engaged in the fight, hand-in-hand, and weeks passed without Ned's seeing any sign of a relapse.

It was now within a week of the Fourth of July. Eagleton was to make a grand splurge, was to have a grand celebration, for it was the centennial anniversary of some important local event.

Among other things there was to be a series of athletic games in the morning. Joe Porter was going to enter the lists, and at his solicitation Ned did likewise.

CHAPTER VI.

IN RIVALRY AGAIN.

Fourth of July dawned as bright and fair a day as could be desired. A better day for the athletic sports designed could not have been selected, the day being remarkably cool for the season.

A grand stand had been erected in a smooth, level field just outside of the town, in addition to which a number of white tents dotted the surface of the short cropped grass; and toward this field a crowd had been pouring all the morning.

At precisely ten o'clock a horn summoned the contestants before the grand stand, where they were addressed by Mr. Weaver. Among the contestants was Arthur Ashton, who, on seeing Ned in his flesh-colored body-piece and brown trunks, scowled fiercely at him.

First on the programme was putting the heavy stone, as it is called; then putting the light stone; next, throwing the hammer; next, standing jumping; next, running jumping; then highest standing leap; then highest running leap; then hop, skip, and jump; then square heel and toe walk of a mile; then a run of a mile.

"Instead of giving a separate prize for each of these events," said Mr. Weaver, "each of which would necessarily be of small value, we have decided to present a more costly token to the winner of the greatest number of these games. The prize selected is a gold watch and chain, accompanied by a silken sash combining our glorious colors, 'red, white, and blue,' the former of which will be presented to, and the latter buckled about the body of the victor by Miss Weaver; and I now declare the tournament opened."

The "putting" of the heavy stone was won by a brawny fellow, a puddler in the iron works, with the muscles of an ox. He also won the putting of the light stone. This was a big start, gaining the first two victories out of ten events.

Ned had felt satisfied that he stood no show in these events, and had reserved himself for "throwing the hammer," and a cheer went up when it was announced that he had won it by six inches. The standing jump was scored to Ashton's credit.

Ashton was a trained athlete, it having been part of his education at the school where he had been educated. He now strutted up and down, and bore himself in a manner indicating his belief that he would carry off the prize.

To his surprise, Ned Newcomb carried off the honors in the running jump.

Ashton opened his eyes. Two victories for Ned and only one for him. He must "not be beaten by that hound," he said to himself.

He won the high standing leap.

Each of the three had now two victories to his credit. But the brawny puddler was out of the race when agility came into play, and every one on the field saw that the prize laid between Ned and Ashton, the chances in the latter's favor, thanks to the training of his muscles in the gymnasium.

But Ned was more muscular, and had won the running jump; he now won the highest running leap, putting him one ahead.

Running was admissible in the hop, skip, and jump, and again Ned was victorious.

Ashton would have now given up the struggle, but for his intense enmity towards Ned.

"Walking and running are my best points, too," he muttered. "I'll try him, anyhow."

And so he did, winning both the heel-and-toe walk, and the run of a mile.

"Why didn't you beat him in the run, Ned?" said Joe Parker. "You might have done it by putting on a little more steam."

"I didn't care to," answered Ned. He had no fear of Ashton, but he hated to widen the breach between them any further.

A tie had not been thought of. But Mr. Weaver cut the Gordian Knot by putting in a hat ten pieces of paper, each bearing the name of one of the feats. It was evident that Ned was better at some, and Ashton at others; this would make it fair for both. The paper drawn proved to be a run of a mile.

An almost deathlike silence followed, so great was the interest. Ned was very pale, and his eyes wandered towards the grand stand, and rested longingly on the silken sash, the guerdon to be fastened on the victor by Miss Weaver. Ned felt a thrill of pleasure at thought of her fastening the sash about his waist; and how glad "mammy" would feel, he thought, as he sought out her eager, flushed face in the crowd.

Then his head drooped.

"No; I must let him win it," he muttered. "My victory would only gain me his deeper enmity, and perhaps make me other enemies. Perhaps his winning may take the sting out of the past."

In his generosity Ned had determined to lose the race, but his mind was suddenly altered, his face became set, his lips were grimly compressed; Arthur Ashton, who stood near, had purposely spoken to a companion loud enough for Ned to hear:

"I'll take the conceit out of the low-lived beggar!"

"Are you ready, gentlemen?" asked the pleasant voice of Mr. Weaver.

They glided forward and paused before the stand. Ned glanced again at the sash, as if the sight would give him new strength; in doing so his eyes encountered Miss Weaver's, and she smiled on him.

"I will win," thought Ned. "I have her sympathies with me."

"Ready," said Mr. Weaver. "Go!"

Both had braced themselves, and at the word they were off like a flash, Ashton in the lead.

The course was half a mile straight away from the stand, around a stake, and back.

With a smile of triumph on his face Ashton kept the lead. He had a sure thing, he thought, and was wildly exultant. So sure was he that as he rounded and faced Ned, he sneered:

"I hope this will teach you a lesson, you dirty beggar."

Ned's teeth were a little more tightly set, that was all.

He rounded the stake, and sprang along the homestretch, both being watched intently by the crowd at the stand.

"Ashton's winning easily."

"No—no—not yet—Newcomb's drawing up on him!"

"Ashton's got it."

"Newcomb's closing up the gap."

"Ashton loses!"

"Newcomb's gaining."

"They're side by side!"

"Ashton's ahead again."

"Newcomb's closed the gap again!"

"Ashton!"

"Newcomb!"

"See how they come—side by side!"

"It'll be a dead heat!"

"No—no—Newcomb's ahead!"

"Newcomb—Newcomb!"

Again they were running side by side. Ned is seen to speak:

"Arthur Ashton, but for your ungentlemanly, insulting words I should have let you win this race. Your tongue has gained your defeat."

And then Ned, who had reserved himself until this moment, let himself out.

"Newcomb's ahead!"

"Newcomb—Newcomb!"

"He runs like a deer!"

"Newcomb's got it."

In vain Ashton put on a burst of speed. Newcomb bounded across the line 'mid wildest cheering twenty feet in advance.

"Three cheers for the victor!" cried Joe Porter, and with a will they were given; and they were still reverberating on the air as Arthur Ashton, livid with passion, was hurried away by his friends.

Ned was allowed a moment to gain his breath, and then, with a sunny smile, Miss Weaver presented him with the watch and chain. Then she stepped to the edge of the platform and buckled the silken sash about his waist.

"You deserve it. It was nobly won," she said.

And, while the spectators were crowding around and congratulating Ned, Arthur Ashton was in his dressing-tent, gnashing his teeth, and cursing his late rival.

It was several hours before the paroxysm passed, and then he called Jim Murdock to him.

"I don't like to," said Murdock, a short time later.

"But you must," snapped Ashton. "I'll pay you well. What more do you want?"

"All right," said Murdock, finally. "But we must both be secret as the grave."

"Of course. I'll be that for my own sake."

Silence once more reigned in Eagleton. The celebration was a thing of the past, and the tired participants were sleeping away their fatigue.

Near the hour of midnight some were fully aroused, while others murmured in their sleep something to the effect "that it was about time the celebration was ended."

A dull, booming sound, like the report of a cannon, had suddenly broken the silence of night, and Joe Porter, who chanced to be standing by his window—from which the Newcomb cottage could be seen—saw a bright glare of light flash up towards Heaven, saw the air filled with flying boards and timber, and bricks and rubbish.

He recoiled in horror, and in very weakness sank into a chair as he exclaimed:

"Good God! Some fiend has blown up the Newcomb cottage, with the inmates in it."

CHAPTER VII.

A GRAVE QUESTION.

Young Joe Porter sank into a chair, and sat gasping for breath beside the window.

A shudder thrilled his frame, and for a moment he hid his face in his hands as if wishing to shut out the horrid sight.

Then he sprang to his feet and dashed into the street, and

then away in the direction of the Newcomb cottage, which he had seen blown into the air in a thousand fragments.

And Ned, and old Sal Newcomb?

It seemed impossible that they could have escaped with their lives.

Yet they had. A merciful Providence had so arranged that the evil machinations of the conspirators failed.

Ned and his mother, for so every one called her, had spent that Fourth of July afternoon in watching the parade which took place. And in the evening they had gone to witness the grand display of fireworks, in the field where the athletic sports had taken place in the morning.

It was after ten o'clock when they reached the little cottage.

It was the first time that day that they had an opportunity for quiet conversation, and they sat down just inside the door of the cottage.

Sal Newcomb was delighted beyond expression at Ned's victory of the morning, and she talked about it, how she had watched him, how she had hoped and feared, and how her heart stood still when he and Ashton were running the deciding race.

Finally Ned sat down on the steps outside, and Sal moved her chair to the threshold. And so they sat and talked, little heeding that the hour was growing late.

The would-be murderer, approaching the cottage from the rear, did not see them, and they talked in so low a tone that he did not hear them.

And while he supposed them calmly sleeping within half a dozen feet of the charge he was planting, they were some distance away.

Lighting a slow match he swiftly retired, and when from a distance he heard the explosion he took it for granted that Ned Newcomb had met his fate.

The first the Newcombs knew of their danger was when there came a deafening report and they were blinded by a sheet of flame. So speedily, that in the interim they could hardly have winked an eye, came the concussion, and as if shot from the mouth of a cannon, both were hurled violently away from the cottage.

Head over heels they went.

Ned was brought up by striking a fence some distance away, where he lay for a good two minutes, stunned and breathless, watching the timbers and boards and furniture of the cottage mounting high in air.

A rafter, after describing a parabola, came down end first, striking and burying itself several feet in the ground within arm's length of Ned's head.

His first thought on recovering the use of his faculties was of Sally.

Rising to his feet, he found that she had been struck by a piece of flying timber; she was lying senseless on the ground, with the blood flowing from a gash in her head.

At first Ned feared she was dead, but a moment's examination informed him that she was alive and breathing.

He was kneeling beside her, as yet somewhat dazed and unable to do anything, when he heard his name called in a tone in which fear and hope were blended.

"Ned—Ned! Are you here? Are you alive?"

It was Joe Porter. Ned recognized the voice of his friend at once.

"Ay, alive and well," Ned answered.

"Thank God! I was standing by my window and saw it all," and then he added softly, "is she dead?"

"No. Will you get some water from the well? She has fainted."

Joe promptly did as Ned desired, and by the time that a few others reached the spot Sal Newcomb's consciousness was restored.

Ned was asked many questions, but he returned nought but evasive replies. He must have time to think. There was something strange in all this, and he determined to keep his own counsel until he could study it out.

"Now, Ned, you and your mother must go home with me," said Joe Porter, when it became certain that a fire would not follow the explosion.

"I don't like to trouble you," was Ned's reply.

"Pshaw! Come along."

Mr. Porter was up when they reached the house. He had been roused by hearing Joe's hasty and rather noisy rush from the house. He gave the Newcombs a hearty welcome.

Old Sal was conducted to a room, and Joe and Ned were left alone with Mr. Porter, who, on learning what had happened, pertinently inquired:

"What caused the explosion, Ned?"

He was silent. He hardly knew what to answer.

"Have you no idea?" asked Mr. Porter. "Perhaps you had powder or some other explosive in the house."

"So I had," assented Ned. "I had a two-pound can of gunpowder in the house, which I bought to help celebrate the day, and failed to use, as I was kept so busy sight-seeing. But how that could have exploded of itself I can't understand, for there was not a particle of fire in the house, either in the stove or lamp."

"Ah!" exclaimed Mr. Porter. "That explains it, for sure none would be fiendish enough to try to blow up your house and murder you and your mother."

Ned was thoughtful but quiet. In his heart he believed that the explosion had been caused by some other explosive beside his can of powder. But having not the slightest evidence of this, he concluded that it would be best for him to hold his tongue.

He connected his sworn enemy, Arthur Ashton, with the explosion, but it would never do for him to breathe a word of his suspicions. To most people it would seem preposterous that Ashton, of a good family, highly educated, moving in the best social circles of Eagleton, should try to injure him, a man in common life, the son of old Sal Newcomb.

And so he let it be said that the cause of the explosion was the two-pound can of powder he had had in the house.

Arthur Ashton had hurried home that night and was in his room when the explosion occurred. He did not venture forth afterward.

"It is done!" he said hoarsely, when the last echo of the booming report had died away, and flinging himself on his bed he tried to sleep.

Once he dosed for a few minutes; but his guilty and troubled mind painted a picture of two torn and mangled human bodies, gaping with many wounds and covered with blood; and with a shriek he aroused himself. His forehead was wet with perspiration, wiping off which he almost wished he could undo what had been done.

He could not sleep more that night. A terrible chill of fear was in his heart, and he was pale and haggard when day broke.

He did not go down and meet the family at breakfast. He dreaded hearing to a certainty that the Newcombs were dead. Waiting until the last minute, he went to the dining-room, finding none there but the girl who waited on the table. He asked no question, and she did not presume to volunteer any information.

It was hard work for him to eat anything, but he managed to swallow a few mouthfuls, and then putting on his hat, went out with a gloomy face, and walked slowly toward the mill.

The street he was on, and the one running parallel with it converged and joined near the mill. At the spot where they met the two principal personages in this story came face to face. Each had been thinking of the other, and both were startled.

The greatest effect was produced on Ashton. It seemed to him as if he must be gazing on a dead man, and gasping for breath he became ashen-hued.

CHAPTER VIII.

IN DIFFICULTY.

Bestowing on Ashton one quick but scrutinizing glance, Ned quickened his pace and soon left his enemy behind. Ashton stood stock still for a full minute, glaring at the vanishing form of the young fellow whom he had supposed was dead, beyond any doubt.

"Do I see a ghost?" he had mentally asked himself when first he saw Ned.

Now he no longer doubted the truth, that by some good fortune Ned had escaped his evil machinations.

"Alive!" gasped the young villain. "Alive, and not even showing a scratch."

He could not understand it.

When he remembered what a miserable night he had passed a feeling almost of joy entered his heart. But as he went on toward the mill, and reflected that in all probability there would be an investigation into the cause of the explosion, his mind became filled with fears lest he should in some way, be connected with it. And from those fears was born a wish that after all the explosion had done its intended murderous work. Before Arthur Ashton reached the office he was conscious only of an insatiable thirst for his enemy's life. He forgot the misery he had suffered during the night, forgot his horrible dream, and only entertained again the wild desire to end the life of the one who had defeated him in the games and borne off the prize received from the hands of pretty Minnie Weaver.

Once or twice that day Ned and Ashton met in the works. Ned paid no attention to the other, who bestowed on him secretly many black and malevolent glances.

Ashton's agitation and manner on their meeting while on the way to the works left no doubt in Ned's mind that his enemy was at the bottom of this attempt on his life. But he was compelled to keep his mouth shut and his suspicions to himself, unsupported, as they were, by evidence.

Later in the day Ashton heard the solution which was generally accepted concerning the explosion, that of its being the two pounds of powder which Ned had said was in the house. He felt greatly relieved. Any suspicion could no longer be directed towards him.

During the day Jim Murdock sauntered into the yard surrounding the works.

Ashton found an opportunity to say to him on the sly:

"Jim, we must not be seen in conversation. Meet me to-night in Chestnut Woods by the dancing platform."

"At what time?"

"Nine o'clock."

"Kerect!" said Jim, and then moved away, without its being observed by anyone that he had exchanged a word with Ashton.

That night, shortly before the appointed hour of meeting, Ashton left the village and made his way towards Chestnut Woods.

This was a fine grove of trees, less than half a mile from Eagleton, much resorted to by picnic parties. Several roughly-built wooden booths and a covered dancing platform were the only buildings in the grove, which was now dark and deserted-looking as the grave.

Around the outside of the platform was a row of benches, on one of which Ashton seated himself, he having arrived first at the rendezvous.

Murdock, however, was not far behind the appointed time in making his appearance.

"Is that you, Jim?" called Ashton, having heard some noise.

There was no answer. Ashton bent his head to listen. The noise was not repeated. Fully five minutes passed thus, and then Ashton was sure he heard steps approaching again.

"Is that you, Jim?" he repeated.

"Yes," came the reply.

For several minutes after meeting, both were silent, each being occupied with his own thoughts.

Ashton was the first to break the silence.

"How did it happen that he escaped without a scratch?" Ashton asked.

"I don't know. I waited until I thought they must be abed, and then fixed the thing and lit the slow-match. The thing went off all right. How they escaped puzzles me; but one thing I do know is that you don't catch me mixed up in such an affair again," and he wiped the drops of sweat from his brow.

"Why not?"

"Why not?" echoed Jim. "Thunder, ain't we had a mighty close shave of it ourselves. You know I said in case they escaped there would be an inquiry; our safety laid in their being killed and unable to answer any questions. The devil himself befriended us in Ned's having that powder in the house; but for that we'd a been behind the bars by this time."

"Nonsense."

"Very well, nonsense or no nonsense, if you want any more such work done you'll have to do it yourself."

"No, I won't; you'll do it for me," said Ashton, angrily.

"Be careful!" warned Murdock, in a sullen tone. "Remember, Ashton, that you've got everything to lose and I nothing. Be careful, I tell you."

Murdock had never before dared to put on so bold a front, and his manner and words now awed the master villain.

"Well," he finally said, "well, Jim, it's safer now to go on than to stand still. However, we'll not talk of future plans now. But why do you back out?"

"I'll tell you—I believe that Ned Newcomb bears a charmed life."

"A charmed life!" and Ashton laughed scornfully. "Such ideas are played out nowadaws. No, he's only been lucky."

Murdock bore the laughter coolly.

"The facts speak for themselves," was the dogged rejoinder. "And mark my words—try as you may, you'll never be able to harm a hair of Ned Newcomb's head."

The words—Jim's solemn way of uttering them—made a deep impression on Ashton in spite of himself—in spite of the contempt he expressed for the belief in the incredible evinced by his companion.

Nothing was to be gained by a longer conversation, and the conspirators moved away, left the woods behind them, and returned toward the village.

They were but barely out of earshot of the dancing platform when, from beneath it, there crawled the figure of a man.

Once on his feet, he burst into a laugh indicating pleasure.

"Well, here's a stroke of luck," he exclaimed. "I'll be running some risk in going into the village, but if I can get to the bottom of this affair I can squeeze enough of the 'rhino' out of these fellows to put enough miles between me and New York so that the 'blood-hounds' (detectives) will never find me."

The next morning a stranger sauntered into Eagleton, and proceeded to make himself at home in the lowest of the village rum mills.

Several evenings later, as Jim Murdock was rambling about the village, and just as he reached a dark and lonely spot, a hand was placed heavily on his shoulder.

Pale as a corpse, startled half out of his senses, he turned to face the man who had thus seized hold of him, and a hollow groan burst from his lips as he heard the words:

"Jim Murdock, you are my prisoner."

He was only able to gasp:

"What for?"

"For several attempts on the life of Ned Newcomb," was the stern reply.

"I knew it," moaned Murdock. "The bottom has dropped out just as I said it would."

"Come along," said the other.

Murdock walked quietly along for a few minutes. Then, finding that the man's grasp on him had slightly relaxed, he quietly prepared himself to suddenly break loose, and make a dash for liberty. A favorable moment arrived, he was on the point of making a dash away, when a horrible chill was caused to traverse his body from head to foot by feeling the cold muzzle of a revolver at his temple.

"Ha—ha!" laughed his captor. "I nipped your little game in the bud. No more of that, do you understand?"

CHAPTER IX.

IN THE TOILS.

Arthur Ashton was on the point of going to bed when there came a knock at his door and the servant girl handed him a note.

"Ashton:—For God's sake don't delay, but come at once to the platform in the woods. All is discovered."

"Murdock."

Ashton staggered back, and in sheer weakness sank on the bed, every vestige of color deserting his face.

All is discovered! Those three words spoke volumes. In an instant pictures of arrest, of a trial, of jury and judge, of sentence, of imprisonment, of cropped hair and striped garb, flashed through his mind.

All is discovered! Then he must arouse himself, must fly. Desperation lent him strength and courage.

"Who brought this note?" he fiercely demanded of the girl.

"I don't know, any more than it was a man," was the reply.

"You never saw him before?"

"Never!"

He waited for no more. He would not stop to pack any clothing. Seizing his hat he hurried downstairs and out of doors.

At first his every impulse was to waste not a minute, but to get out of town at once. But then it struck him that it might be better to see Jim Murdock. If he had learned first of the discovery, he might have also framed a sure plan of escape.

Had it not been for this selfish consideration, Ashton would certainly have left Murdock in the lurch.

He bounded on toward Chestnut Woods at a rapid pace, and arrived at the platform out of breath.

"Jim—Jim! Are you here?"

"Yes," was the reply. "Is he with you?"

"Who?"

"The fellow who collared me," said Murdock, on whose lips the words still lingered when Ashton felt a rough hand on his shoulder.

"Devil take you, Murdock! You have led me into a trap!" hissed Ashton.

"Led you out of one, if you do what is right!" retorted Murdock.

"That'll do," said their captor, who had hinted to Murdock as they walked along after Murdock's failure to escape, that for a certain sum of money he would hush up the matter.

This idea had been seized on by Murdock with avidity, and he allowed himself to be led into the woods.

After having written the note to Ashton, he allowed himself to be bound hand and foot by his captor, who had delivered the note in person, and followed closely back on Ashton's heels.

"That'll do. No more quarreling, I tell you. Come now—come now, cool off, both of you. You're in a box, that's clear enough; it rests with me, you know, to say whether or not you want to be out of it."

"How can it be done?" said Ashton, eagerly. "But in the first place, who are you? And what can you prove against us?"

"I can prove that you have twice, at least, tried to murder Ned Newcomb. Once by setting fire to the house where he lived, and then by blowing him up. You set fire also to the stables to draw attention away from the burning house in which Ned Newcomb lived. I can prove that you are firebugs as well as attempted murderers!"

Ashton was thunderstruck at the minute knowledge which this man appeared to have of their doings.

"Enough!" he gasped. "What do you mean by 'letting us out of this box?'"

"Exactly what I say," was the reply. "None know a word of this but myself. Give me two thousand dollars and I'll go away and say no more about it. Is it a bargain?"

"Two thousand dollars!" cried Ashton, his heart sinking. "You might as well ask for a million."

"Your father's rich, they say," coolly rejoined his captor. "That won't help me."

"Oh, yes it will. Just suppose you give him an inkling of the truth. Don't you think he'd give you the money rather than see you in stripes?"

"No—no!" gasped Ashton. "That would never do—never!"

"Very well, then," said the other coolly, and—snap—snap—Ashton's wrists were secured by hand-cuffs before he could fairly comprehend the fact. "Very well, then! In a few hours the whole story will be known, and you in jail."

"No—no!" cried Ashton, in agony. "No—no! We must get away. At least let us go; you can do that much!"

"I have made you a proposition. Take your choice. Either two thousand dollars or to prison you go."

Ashton's head sank into his arms. He knew it would be useless to go to his father for the money. What could he do? He was in the toils of his own wickedness.

"If I could get it I would," he said, hollowly. "But I can't do it."

"Yes, you can."

"How?"

"You're a trusted man in the office of the iron company. They keep as much money as that in their safe sometimes, don't they?"

"Yes."

"Then that's your field."

"But I alone know the combination. They would suspect me at once."

"Well, that's your lookout, not mine. Is it yes or no?"

"Yes," said Ashton, after a struggle.

After half an hour's conversation Dan Reynolds, for such he told them was his name, let the conspirators go, after warning them that he would have an eye on them continually.

Ashton was desperate. The money must be had, but how was it to be obtained without directing suspicion on himself? Fate opened up a way. For some reason the lock on the safe worked hard the next morning, and when he threw the bolt back there was a snap inside.

Something had broken. The machinist attached to the works was called in to take out the lock, and he found that one of the tumblers, as they are called, had broken where there was a flaw in the metal.

"I'll take it over to the shop, and file out a new tumbler to

take its place," said the machinist. "The lock will then be as good as new again."

"Be careful to let no one tamper with it," said Mr. Weaver, who was at the office.

Before night fell the lock was returned as good and perfect as ever.

The next morning as Mr. Weaver sat at breakfast, he was startled by the appearance of a messenger from the office.

"What has happened?" he demanded.

"The office was broken into during the night."

"Well?"

"And the safe has been robbed."

Seizing his hat, Mr. Weaver hurried down to the works. Sure enough the safe had been robbed. The door stood wide open, but was uninjured, not even scratched. The combination had been used.

"Ashton, do you know anything of this?" demanded Mr. Weaver.

"No, sir," was the prompt reply; but Ashton's eyes were averted after a brief meeting with those of Mr. Weaver. "I meant to have changed the combination when the lock was brought back, but neglected to do so."

"Call Johnson."

This was the machinist, a man whom Mr. Weaver thought as much above suspicion as Ashton.

None about the works yet knew of the robbery, or that anything was wrong, and Johnson looked startled and uneasy when he entered the office.

"Johnson, last night our safe was robbed, and by someone who had the combination. Do you know anything about it?"

"No, sir."

"Did anyone see the lock while you had it in your possession?"

"No, sir, not near enough by to examine it closely. But I forgot—Ned Newcomb came up and looked over my shoulder while I was at work."

"Send for Ned Newcomb."

A misgiving entered Ned's heart at this summons from the office, but he promptly reported.

"Newcomb, our safe was entered and robbed last night. Do you know anything about it?"

"No, sir. How should I?" and Ned's eyes opened in surprise.

"You saw the safe lock when Johnson had it?"

"I did, sir."

"Did you get the combination?"

Ned flushed.

"I did not. Had it been before my eyes I would not have looked at it."

Mr. Weaver looked sorrowful.

"The safe was opened by some one possessing the combination. I certainly could not rob my own safe, and the combination cannot be possibly known to anyone outside of you three."

In other words, "between those three laid the crime." Ned's cheeks flushed with shame at the thought that he might be the suspected one of the three. But he bore himself proudly and awaited the result calmly.

"I swear that I am innocent," said Johnson, solemnly. "Will you not search me, Mr. Weaver? Surely some indication will be found if I am guilty."

"And search me, too," added Ashton.

Without a word, Ned followed the example of the others, and turned his pockets inside out.

"Here is my coat," said Ashton. "Examine this, Mr. Weaver, and send a messenger for Johnson's and Newcomb's coats."

A messenger was dispatched for their coats. Johnson's was examined and laid aside. Mr. Weaver then took up Ned's. The pockets contained nothing to fasten the barest suspicion upon him. But as Mr. Weaver was withdrawing his hand from the

last pocket a rustling sound, like that of new bills, caught his ear. Looking inside the coat, he found a slit in the lining; inserting his hand into this he drew out—a package of the stolen bills!

Ned glanced up in time to see a flash of triumph on Ashton's face, and knew that this was some of his enemy's work.

"I am sorry for you, Newcomb," said Mr. Weaver, coldly. "I had expected something better from you. You must accompany me to the Squire's."

"Very well, sir," said Ned calmly.

He uttered no word in his own vindication. He knew it would be useless. He might easily have made his escape, for Mr. Weaver laid no detaining hand on him. But this he scorned to do.

An hour later he was behind bolts and bars, the inmate of a cell.

The evil had once again triumphed over the good.

Ashton had conquered. But the end was not yet come.

CHAPTER X.

OUT ON BAIL.

Ned Newcomb had been committed to jail on a charge of robbing the safe of the iron works. Ashton's last villainous scheme had been more successful than the first ones. To the reader it is, of course, perfectly plain how the thing was worked.

During the night Ashton had opened the safe and taken the money which Dan Reynolds demanded as the price of his silence. He had seen Ned when he was glancing over the machinist's shoulder when he was busy with the lock; the money found in Ned's coat had been placed there without much trouble.

As long as Mr. Weaver was around Ashton was compelled to school himself; but the minute he was alone he commenced to dance, and his features began to work with an expression of malicious fiendish glee.

"Ha—ha!" he laughed. "Why didn't I think of something like this before? It's better—it makes me feel better—gives me more satisfaction to think of him in prison with cropped hair and striped clothes than if he were dead. Ha—ha! His character will always bear a stain. This is something like revenge!"

Ned Newcomb arrested for robbing a safe! Could it be possible? went from lip to lip.

Some there were who said they knew "he'd allus been a bad un!" Others—"you couldn't expect anything else with such bringing up." And others again, those whom Ned had endeared to him by his manliness and courage, said: "There's some mistake here, something crooked. Wait and see. Don't condemn the lad until the jury speaks."

Among these latter was Joe Porter. He stoutly maintained that Ned was innocent, and stuck to it through thick and thin.

Mr. Porter, inclined to think the best of Ned at all times, was so far influenced by his son's faith that he determined to go bail for Ned as soon as possible.

And Ned himself?

It certainly was not pleasant to be the inmate of a cell, and charged with such a crime. When anybody appeared his head would rise and he would face the person with proud face and fearless eye. But when he was alone his head would sink sadly for he knew enough of the hollowness of the friendships of the world to know that most of those people who only two days before would have praised him to the skies would now have nothing to say but "I told you so," that those who had been

glad before to call him a friend would now be as eager to disclaim the fact.

He would not have given way so strongly to this last feeling had he known that a few faithful hearts still clung to him.

A ray of sunshine entered his cell that afternoon when Joe Porter made his appearance.

"I came as quick as ever I could, Ned," said Joe, feeling that an apology was necessary for not having been there within half an hour of Ned's incarceration.

"God bless you, Joe, for this new proof of confidence," said Ned warmly, with the dew of gratitude in his eyes. "Your presence shows me that at least one person believes in my innocence."

"I certainly do," was the prompt reply. "And I'm not the only one, Ned. My father is on your side, and by to-morrow, at furthest, he will have furnished bail for you."

"Do you mean that?" asked Ned earnestly. It seemed impossible that he could have gained such friends as these.

"It is as true as gospel, Ned!"

Joe remained with him an hour or more, and then took his departure, bidding Ned be of good heart.

Not long after Ned was given new reason for joy.

A note was handed to him through the little barred opening in the cell door.

The handwriting was small, and very dainty and pretty, and the paper and envelope gave off a most delicate perfume. It was from a lady—but whom?

It greatly puzzled Ned, and cudgel his brains as he might he could not even conjecture who had sent it. He turned it over and over before breaking the seal, but without obtaining any clew.

At last he opened it.

He found a most genuine surprise in store for him.

"Mr. Newcomb:—Papa has just told me of what has happened, and you don't know how sorry I am.

"I told him I did not care how things appeared, for I was sure you never did such a wicked thing; and I think he is almost of the same opinion. Do not be discouraged—you will not be, I am sure, if you are innocent—and all will come right in the end.

Winifred Weaver."

It may have been a foolish thing to do, but Ned Newcomb raised the note to his lips and kissed it; then read it again, kissed it once more, then hid it in the breast-pocket of his vest, just above his high-beating heart.

He was almost glad, now, that he had been imprisoned.

The next day Ned was released on bail, Mr. Porter having become his surety.

"Now, Ned," said that gentleman, when he, Ned, and Joe were all closeted in the library, "now, Ned it must be confessed that things look rather black for you. Have you any theory as to how those bills reached that place in your coat?"

"They were placed there," said Ned.

"Yes—but by whom?"

Ned was silent a minute.

He hardly wished to accuse Ashton without some tangible grounds on which to base his charges.

"Come, Ned," said Mr. Porter kindly. "I don't wish to make you feel that by becoming your surety I have laid you under any obligation. But having done so, I think it is for your good, and that I have a right to know your private opinions."

"You are right, sir," said Ned. "I have held back only because I cannot prove what I am morally sure of—that Arthur Ashton placed those bills in my coat."

"Arthur Ashton!" exclaimed Mr. Porter. "Be careful, Ned; remember you are accusing the son of one of the magnates of Eagleton."

"I am aware of it," said Ned, flushing. "Belonging to your

own social rank, it is only to be expected that you should uphold him, and even think it impossible that such as Ashton could wish to harm such as I."

"You reason well," replied Mr. Porter. "Now, what are your reasons for suspecting Ashton?"

Ned then related the story of the election in the fire company, and the consequent birth of a bitter enmity; told of the strange odor in the hut the night it burned down; of the race, and Ashton's bitter words, and of the explosion.

Mr. Porter listened, saw that it could all be as Ned said, yet he hardly believed it. It seemed impossible to him that Ashton could be so fiendish.

"Well, Ned," he finally said, "if I don't quite see things as you do, believe me, Joe's faith has bolstered up my own, and I frankly say that dark as things look I believe you innocent."

"God bless you for those kind words," said Ned. "I owe you a great deal, Mr. Porter, and I hope the day may come when I shall be able to repay you. And now, sir, let me go to my mother, who has sorrowed, no doubt."

Mr. Porter had established Sal Newcomb in a furnished cottage which he owned, and thither Ned went.

When nearly there he met Ashton.

"Stop, Arthur Ashton," said Ned, planting himself in his enemy's path. "I demand of you to right the wrong you have done me."

"Get out of my way. I do not care to be seen talking to a jail-bird!" sneered Ashton, brushing past.

A thunder-cloud of passion darkened Ned's forehead at this insult, his teeth were tightly set, his hands clenched. An instant, and he flew at Ashton.

CHAPTER XI.

NED'S FAIR CHAMPION

It was not until Mr. Weaver returned that day to dinner that his family learned of the loss which had taken place, and that Ned Newcomb was supposed to be the culprit.

"Impossible, papa!" Winnie had exclaimed. "Ned Newcomb was too brave and noble and good ever to have done such a thing."

"But a portion of the stolen money was found in his coat," said her father dryly.

"I don't care—he didn't do it, anyhow," said Minnie, impulsively and yet a little doggedly. It is a way all of her sex have, of saying a thing and sticking to it though the Heavens fall, no matter on how frail a base they rest the assertion.

"I would certainly rather not believe it," said Mr. Weaver. "But there can no longer be any doubt that he is a young villain, honest only so long as he had no opportunity for being dishonest."

"I don't care," said Winnie, "he is innocent. He saved my life and I'll always believe he is good at heart."

"That is what troubles me," said Mr. Weaver, in a perplexed tone. "I hate to prosecute the lad who saved the life of my only child."

"Then take him out of jail, papa—say it is some mistake—surely, you can do that."

He shook his head.

"Let us say no more about it," he suggested, and the subject was dropped. But as soon as she gained her room Winnie penned the note which Ned received.

The next day Mr. Weaver had occasion to send Ashton out. It was the time when he and Ned met. As Mr. Weaver sat in the office awaiting Ashton's return Mr. Porter entered. He had started for the works as soon as Ned left his house.

"Ah! how are you, Porter? Sit down!"

"Thanks," and Mr. Porter took the indicated seat, and at once plunged into the business which had brought him thither. "I have come to talk with you about young Newcomb."

"You have gone bail for him, I believe," said Mr. Weaver.

"I have," was the prompt reply. "Weaver, do you believe him guilty?"

"I do, most decidedly. Not that I wish to do so, but the facts cannot be ignored. Perhaps you do not understand them fully," and he proceeded to give his visitor a detailed account of the whole affair.

"Notwithstanding all which," said Mr. Porter, when he had finished, "I believe him to be innocent. Such a face as his can never belong to a thief."

"Appearances are deceptive," said Mr. Weaver dryly. "To be candid, Porter, I liked the young fellow, and could I conscientiously do otherwise, I would not convict him, but would let him go free, for I cannot forget that he saved my Winnie from an awful death."

"Then you would not care to withdraw the charge—profess your belief in his honesty, and take him back to work?"

"I should not," was the honest reply.

"Then I shall certainly take him into my own employ," said Mr. Porter, rising to go.

"I am glad to hear you say so," said Mr. Weaver. "I want to believe him honest, but the facts—the facts as I see them—cannot be got over."

Mr. Weaver was in a most strange state of mind regarding Ned Newcomb. In his heart he sometimes felt that Ned could not be guilty, yet this was combated by the evidence of his eyes. Could Ned have broken jail and escaped, he would have been heartily glad at not being compelled to prosecute him; yet, under the circumstances he felt that he could do nothing else.

Not long after Mr. Porter departed, Ashton returned. His face was hot and flushed, but he said nothing of his meeting with Ned.

In the first moments of his intense indignation at being called a "jail-bird," Ned could have choked Ashton until he was black in the face. But luckily he gained control of himself very quickly, and releasing his grasp on Ashton's throat, he flung him away contemptuously, paused a minute, and then applied his foot to the most fleshy part of Ashton's anatomy.

"That is the only way to treat such vermin!" said Ned, in a disgusted tone. "It would never do to soil my hands on you."

Ashton grew livid with rage, but he had on one occasion had a bout with Ned, and knew that the latter was more than his master; and, nursing the resentment he dared not attempt to put into execution, he hurried out of Ned's reach.

Mr. Weaver noticed a change in his usual expression, and asked what had happened.

"Nothing," was the evasive reply, and Ashton dove deep into the books, and remained apparently hard at work, though he never made a figure. He was brooding over the kicking he had received, and vowing all sorts of vengeance.

His plans had not worked as smoothly as he had hoped for.

It was enraging to find Ned a free man, as free as himself, at liberty to come and go as he pleased.

"Curse those Porters!" he muttered under his breath. "And curse Newcomb more than all. I would have been satisfied to have seen him sent to jail, but now—now only his heart's blood will satisfy me. I'll make no mistake another time," he added, grimly.

That night, shortly after darkness had settled over the face of the earth, Ashton issued from his home, and at a dark and lonely spot met his companion in crime, Jim Murdock.

"Have you seen him to-day?" asked Ashton, as they walked slowly along.

"Yes. He said he'd be waiting for us in Chestnut Woods at

at ten o'clock. Do you know how much money there was that we got away with?"

"Nearly three thousand."

For a while they walked on in silence, having in the meanwhile reached the banks of the creek into which the water flowed which had passed over the big wheel in the mill.

On either side of the creek the banks sustained a thick growth of bushes, alder, and a few young and old trees intermingled.

"It must be just about here somewhere," finally said Murdock.

"Just ahead here," returned Ashton. "Here is the spot—that's the very tree."

Sinking on their knees, they began to dig into the soft earth with their hands at the foot of a small hickory tree. In a few moments a flat stone of about ten inches in diameter was exposed; lifting this Ashton drew from beneath it a large roll of bills.

"Strike a match, Jim," he said, as he straightened out the bills.

Murdock did as requested, lighting another match as fast as the preceding ones expired, while by the light thus obtained Ashton counted out two thousand dollars. The remainder of the money was concealed again beneath the stone, and the latter covered with earth.

They then retraced their steps, and made for the Chestnut Woods, where they met Reynolds.

"There's no shenanigan about this! There's two thousand here sure?" said Reynolds, threateningly, as he took the roll of bills.

"There's two thousand there," answered Ashton; "and now for God's sake get away from here and never let us see you again."

"Neither you will," laughed Reynolds, harshly. "That is, unless I want to be staked again," he added, with a leer.

Ashton grew sick at heart. These last words showed him how completely he was in the power of Reynolds, who could return at any time and force money out of him—money that might not always be obtained as successfully as on the present occasion.

Reynolds enjoyed his discomfiture exceedingly.

"Tra la-la!" he gaily said, and waving his hand, disappeared. A week, two, three, then a month, two months, three months had passed; Ashton had not been troubled by Reynolds and began again to feel secure and confident. Then he and Murdock began to plot and plan again against the life of Ned Newcomb.

One day as he sat in the office exulting over some newly-hatched scheme, he received a most startling surprise.

The sheriff of the county walked in, with the startling remark:

"I have business with you!"

Of what nature but one could that business be?

CHAPTER XII.

ONE MORE FRIEND.

Old Sal Newcomb was almost beside herself with joy when she saw Ned walk in, alone and free.

Instantly she jumped to the conclusion—wrongly, of course—that the terrible charge against Ned had been disproved, and that he had been honorably acquitted.

He soon set her right on this point, telling her that by Mr. Porter's kindness he was released on bail, until the time of his trial.

She never thought of asking if he were innocent of the

charge. She took it for granted that he was, so implicit was her faith in him.

That evening Joe Porter put in an appearance, and told Ned that his father wished him to call at his store in the morning.

"Ned," said Joe, "I've been thinking over all you said about Ashton, and I'm becoming convinced that your suspicions are well founded. I even believe my father begins to think so, too."

"I was sorry I had to state my own belief, having so poor a foundation to base it upon, but of course when your father asked it was only right that I should tell him."

"Well, Ned, seeing that the spring term of court is just over, you will have a good four months before the fall term at your disposal. During these four months we must both keep our eyes peeled, and if we don't prove your innocence it will be because Joe Porter is as blind as a new-born mole."

"Then you are going to play detective in my behalf?"

"I am."

"I will not try to thank you and your father in words; let my actions speak my gratitude."

The next morning Ned called at Mr. Porter's store, and his eyes filled with tears of gratitude at this new expression of confidence in his integrity when Mr. Porter offered to take him into his employ.

Truly, in his hour of trial, had warm friends been raised up for him.

Another evidence of the genuineness of Joe's heart was given about two weeks later.

It was at the first meeting of Hook and Ladder, No. 2, after this charge against Ned. As was natural, feeling himself resting under a cloud, which might reflect discredit on the company, he remained away, and, instead, sent them a letter couched in the following words:

"Hook and Ladder No. 2:

"Gentlemen.—Since our last meeting there has been made against me a serious charge, of the nature of which you are all acquainted.

"Under the circumstances I can see that my presence among you might reflect on our noble No. 2, which, hitherto, has borne a record untarnished by even the slightest taint; and deeply though I regret parting from you, I feel that I am only doing you justice in tendering my resignation as the foreman and a member of your company. Should the charge not be sustained, I feel that you will as gladly welcome me back as I shall be happy to return. Respectfully yours,

"Ned Newcomb."

Joe Porter, as the presiding officer, took it upon himself to read this communication.

"Newcomb understands himself," said one, as Joe sat down.

"He must have fine feelings," said another.

"He does the correct thing," said a third.

A fourth arose and moved that the resignation be accepted. The motion was duly accepted, for perhaps no one in ten there assembled had any doubt of Ned's guilt.

"Before putting the motion I wish to say a few words," said Joe Parker, as he arose. Then he began to speak, his eyes sparkling, his face aglow, his words coming fast and eloquent. He portrayed the time of Ned's joining them; his gallant actions since, which had shed such a lustre on No. 2; spoke of the enthusiasm with which he had inspired them; told how from being considered a vagabond, he had forced people to respect him by his bravery.

"Now, gentlemen," he said in conclusion, "this brave young fellow is accused of committing a crime. Circumstances point toward him, it is true, but he has not yet been convicted. Shall we then adjudge him guilty by accepting his resignation. I cry 'shame' on those who will so quickly go back on the most gallant foreman which No. 2 has ever had. For myself, I shall

vote against accepting the resignation until such time as his guilt is absolutely proved. I will now put the resolution."

The telling words of Joe Porter went to every man's heart, and by a unanimous vote the resignation was rejected. A committee was appointed to notify Ned, and the next day he received the following:

"Hook and Ladder Company No. 2 sincerely sympathizes with its gallant foreman, and not being willing to believe him guilty until he is proved so, must respectfully refuse to accept his resignation at the present time.

"Henry Dobson, Sec'y.

"By order of Company.

"To Mr. Ned Newcomb."

And so Ned remained nominally the foreman of No. 2, although he never went near the company's house, Joe Porter being acting foreman.

Cheerful in spite of the dark cloud overhanging his future, faithfully performing the duties assigned to him by Mr. Porter, Ned watched the days and weeks slip by and become months.

As he returned home one evening from his work, he was surprised at seeing a wagon drive swiftly past containing three people—Ashton, the sheriff of the county and another man who was a stranger to him.

"Can Ashton have been arrested for anything?" he wondered, as he went his way; and he pondered on the subject after he went to bed—laid awake, and pondered and wondered if it would have any bearing on his own case.

He had just fallen into a light slumber when he was brought to his feet by the crashing notes of the alarm bell, and the almost simultaneous cry of:

"Fire—fire!"

He forgot everything but that there was a fire—forgot the charge against him—forgot that he was only foreman of No. 2 by courtesy—forgot everything until he reached the truck-house, and was on the point of seizing the trumpet, the insignia of office.

Then he shrank back.

"Take it, Ned," urged Joe Porter.

"No!" and Ned shook his head. "It must be carried by you, Joe; but I will go along."

"All right, then. Man the ropes! Come, Ned. Run her out! It must be up this street. Rattle her along lively, boys!"

And away they went.

It was the residence of the leading dealer in drygoods in Eagleton. It was already a mass of flame, and the inmates of the house stood around in their nightclothing, forced to flee without dressing, so great headway had the flames made before being discovered.

The house was doomed; naught could save it. But its owner was more grieved from another consideration. His eldest son, a boy of thirteen, had not been seen to issue, and the distracted father knew not what to do. The whole lower part of the house was in flames, and no one dared to enter.

"There he is—there he is."

Suddenly the wild cry ran from lip to lip as he appeared on the roof.

The strong men shuddered.

"My God! can nothing be done?" groaned the father. A hose carriage stood near by.

To this a lithe figure sprang, with knife in hand.

"Let us! you can't cut this rope," growled one of her men, and he attempted to interfere.

Spat!

He got a clenched fist square between the eyes, and went down like a log.

Ned, for he it was, soon had about seventy-five feet of rope in his possession. With it over his arm he dashed into the

building closest to the burning house, the space between being twenty or thirty feet.

In two minutes he was seen to appear on the roof.

The boy saw him at once, and a gleam of hope darted into his face.

"Take this end of rope and fasten it securely about a chimney," cried Ned, shrilly, and his words were heard above the roar of the flames.

The next moment the coiled rope went flying across the space; its end was caught and fastened.

"Down below!" yelled daring Ned.

"Ay—ay!" rejoined Joe Parker, his heart in his mouth.

"If we take fire, turn the hose on us at all costs."

So saying, Ned flung himself from the roof he was on, having previously fastened his own end of the rope, and went hand over hand toward the burning building, not pausing until he had reached the eaves, and the bright tongues of flames were shooting up all about him.

"Quick!" he called to the boy. "Slide down—easy, though—don't jerk more than you can help. Clasp me under my arms so as not to impede me—hang tight—so—here we go!"

And, supporting the double weight, Ned began to work toward the adjoining house.

"My God! he's on fire!" shrieked somebody.

"The hose!" yelled Joe Parker.

The stream of water was directed toward Ned. It was a heavy, solid stream, and the first shock nearly tore him from his hold.

"He can't stand it—see—see—he wavers—he flags—he falls!"

"Oh, my poor—poor child!" wailed the boy's mother, as she fell in a swoon.

CHAPTER XIII.

MR. WEAVER AND NED.

The shock of being struck by the solid stream of water turned on Ned nearly dragged him from his hold on the rope. In fact, not one who saw him but thought him on the point of falling, and the mother of the boy whom Ned had periled his life to save sank to the earth in a swoon.

But Ned got a new grip and hung motionless, save for the swaying movement imparted by the stream of water, which in the space of a minute had extinguished the flames which had fastened on their clothing.

Joe Porter was, perhaps, the coolest and clearest-headed person there. Possibly his wits were sharpened by the fact that it was his particular friend who was in danger.

At any rate he sent one of his subordinates flying into the adjoining residence for a good, stout blanket. In a minute the active fellow was back, blanket in hand.

"Catch hold of this, a dozen of you!" cried Joe, firmly and sharply.

Ned had by this time learned that his strength was exhausted, that he would be unable to reach the building with his load, and he was now hanging there for all his strength was worth, it being only a question of time now as to how soon he must let go.

At this juncture Joe and his assistants appeared beneath him with the tightly drawn blanket several feet above the ground.

Ned glanced down, saw it, and a gleam of hope came into his face.

Then a low exclamation reached his ear which caused him to shudder.

It was high time something was done, for the rope was now burning.

"Let go," said Ned, in as steady a tone as he could muster. "Let go; they will catch you in a blanket."

The boy could not see the blanket, and clung tighter than ever.

"No—no! Save me—save me!" gasped the frightened lad.

"You must let go," said Ned firmly. But the boy was afraid. Ned released one hand, and supporting their double weight by the other, sought to, and finally released the boy's terrified clutch.

Downward he swiftly went, and was received on the blanket uninjured.

"Now, Ned!" cried Joe, when the boy had been taken from the blanket.

Ned doubled himself up and dropped.

He was equally as fortunate as the boy, and a moment or two later stood upon his feet safe and unharmed, save for a blister or two.

Up to this time the crowd had stood watching with bated breath each incident in this intense drama. Now, as if by popular accord, was drawn a deep breath of relief, and this was followed by a low but deep and hearty murmur of applause and commendation.

Then the crowd parted, the father of the rescued boy pressed to Ned's side, grasped the brave young fellow's hand, and huskily said:

"Ned Newcomb, while I live you shall never want for a friend, so help me Heaven!"

As we have said before, the building was doomed. Every exertion was directed towards saving the adjoining property, in which the gallant firemen were successful.

"Nobly done, Ned!" cried Mr. Porter, when he got the chance to shake the young fellow by the hand. "This will do more to disprove your guilt than anything else you could have done."

In towns of the size of Eagleton a fire is always the general subject of conversation for some days subsequent to its occurrence; and in talking of this one it was necessary to introduce the name of Ned Newcomb.

Mr. Porter had judged rightly when he intimated that Ned's action would modify public opinion concerning him.

"He's as brave as a lion," was the popular verdict regarding Ned, and then in the same breath would be added: "Can such a fellow be guilty of robbing his employer's safe? It is impossible!"

Such comments were not confined to the poor people of Eagleton. They were heard on the lips of the richest and proudest of Eagleton's people. Yes, Ned Newcomb's name was becoming a household word in the best families.

This being the case, Winnie Weaver heard many words of praise and commendation of Ned, and her eyes sparkled with pleasure.

"He is a hero among heroes." These words we heard fall from the lips of a gentleman who had witnessed that daring rescue, and he was right. Ned Newcomb deserves some fitting acknowledgment of his great courage.

"It seems a great pity that one who has again proved himself so noble and manly should have a cloud resting on his fair name. Our townsmen are asking themselves: 'Can he be both a hero and a thief?'—and what answer is there but 'no'?"

"The young man has our profoundest sympathies; and our most earnest wish is that when the day of his trial arrives his reputation may emerge clear and spotless as the noonday sun."

Such were the closing paragraphs of the Eagleton paper's remarks on the fire, and Winnie Weaver carried them to her father and read them for him.

"Do you still believe him guilty, papa?" she inquired.

Mr. Weaver looked very grave.

He did not have it in his heart to prosecute Ned. He would

not have done so had he not felt himself bound in duty to do so. Only Ned, the machinist, and Ashton, could have possibly known the combination of the lock. To say it was a mistake, to let Ned go, was to imply a possibility of the dishonesty of the other two.

He did not reply to Winnie's question, but the following day he dropped into Mr. Porter's store.

"Is Newcomb here?" he inquired.

Ned stepped forward, having heard the question.

"Can I see you alone, Newcomb?"

"Ha!" exclaimed Mr. Porter, just entering. "How are you, Weaver? Take him into the office, Ned."

Mr. Porter would have remained where he was, only that Ned insisted on his accompanying them.

"You have stuck to me, Mr. Porter, and I wish you to know all."

An awkward silence followed after they had reached the private office and were closed in from the prying ears of the clerks outside. But presently Ned broke the ice.

"You wished to see me, Mr. Weaver?"

"Yes. The truth is, Newcomb, that I have long respected you and hate to prosecute you, and what I wanted to say is—that if you will make a private confession to me, and tell me honestly the causes and reasons you had, I will weigh them well, and if I can do so consistently will take you back in my employ, and by withdrawing the charge, clear your name."

"But you can't disprove the fact that a package of bills was found in my coat," said Ned calmly.

"No," admitted Mr. Weaver, reluctantly.

"And you can't swear that the bills were not a portion of the money stolen from you?"

"No," reluctantly again.

"Then, sir, your proposition is more like what an enemy might make instead of a friend; for with those facts unexplained the shadow of a crime would always cling to my name even though I was not convicted. Another thing, you believe me guilty. Consequently, Mr. Weaver, I must decline your proposal; first, I have no confession to make; second, I demand the clearest and fullest investigation into this affair. You will have to bring me to trial even though you do not wish to. It is my right, and I demand it."

Ned spoke in a clear, ringing voice, and proudly he carried himself the while.

"You have my ultimatum," he added, a moment later. "I will either go to prison and suffer for a crime I never committed, or else my innocence will be established before God and man!"

And turning haughtily on his heel, he strode from the office.

CHAPTER XIV.

CRIME BEGETS CRIME.

"Like begets like," is an old and well-worn adage, whose truth has been proved time and again.

"Crime begets crime," is only another rendition of the same idea, and is equally as truthful.

This had been the case with Arthur Ashton. Having given way to his passions, and allowed his hatred of Ned Newcomb to lead him into attempted murder, he had been obliged to rob the safe to buy the silence of the man who had, by some means unknown to him, learned the truth.

"I have business with you!" had said the sheriff of the county, and Arthur Ashton's cheek had paled, for he thought that his villainy had come to light, and that the prison doors were even then yawning for him.

After fumbling a moment in his pocket, the sheriff flung on

the desk before Ashton a soiled and crumpled envelope. Opening this in a mechanical way, the young villain read the letter it contained; his face lighted, he breathed in a manner indicating relief. But a moment afterward a troubled look crossed his face, showing that the contents of this letter were not altogether pleasant.

"Ashton, my boy, I'm jugged. I didn't mean to do it, but I got off on a spree, and being a little quarrelsome when in liquor, I got into a dispute, and ended by sticking a knife into a fellow.

"Now, then, unless I manage to escape from here I shall have to 'stretch hemp'; not on this account, for the fellow will get over it, they say, but on an old charge.

"I depend on you to help me escape. If you don't help me, I'll blab on you. So come and see me at once. I shall give this to somebody to deliver to you. No one will know the contents, so you will have no need of being frightened—as yet. Don't keep me waiting, as I never did have much patience.

"Dan Reynolds."

While Ashton was reading this a man had entered the office; the newcomer was a stranger. He afterward learned that it was the sheriff of the adjoining county, under whose charge Reynolds was.

No sooner did Ashton realize that no positive and immediate danger overhung him than his wits began to work with their accustomed freedom.

"So this man Reynolds sent you to me?" he afterwards said to the sheriff of the adjoining county, Merker by name.

"Yes."

"I can't understand it" said Ashton, with a well-counterfeited puzzled expression. "Reynolds—Dan Reynolds! Never heard of such a man, much less know him. You are sure he meant me?"

"Positive," said Merker. "That's your name, sure enough, on the envelope."

"So it is—so it is," assented Ashton. "Well, I hardly know what to do. He intimates that he has something of importance to tell me, however, and I suppose I might as well go and see him. Perhaps you are going back to your jail now, Mr. Merker?"

"I am."

"Let me see—how far is it?"

"Twenty-eight or twenty-nine miles."

"And can you see that I get home to-morrow?"

"There are livery stables in town," was the reply of Merker.

"Yes, to be sure," said Ashton, not altogether relishing the answer and look of the strange sheriff.

In ten minutes he had made arrangements to accompany Merker, and when he was seen by Ned in company with the two sheriffs he was on his way to see Dan Reynolds.

The latter was not spared a multitude of curses from Ashton, who dimly saw that Reynolds' very existence threatened his safety. Once Ashton's eyes gleamed in a peculiar manner, and his brow contracted. He was thinking how poison could be safely used.

It was a long drive, and night had long since fallen when they reached the little town where was situated the jail in which Reynolds was confined.

Merker would not allow Ashton to visit the jail at that hour, and he was consequently compelled to seek shelter until the morning at the hotel.

"So you're come," grumbled Reynolds, when Ashton appeared next morning.

"Well, my good man," said Ashton, in an intentionally loud tone, so that the sheriff might easily overhear, "how do you happen to know of me? And what can you possibly want of me?"

"It's something private," replied Reynolds, taking the cue. And then they conducted the subsequent conversation in low tones, which could not possibly be overheard.

"But how can I do it?" exclaimed Ashton in despair, after half an hour's discussion.

"I don't know how it is to be done, nor do I care. All I know is that you've got to do it," said Reynolds, doggedly.

"Careful!" said Ashton. "Be careful, Reynolds; do not badger me too much. In case worse comes to worst I am at least free, and can easily escape, leaving you in limbo."

The force of this truth was apparent to Reynolds, who thenceforth became urgent rather than authoritative.

"Of course," said Ashton, "of course I do not wish to leave Eagleton, and if I can help you I will. But how is it to be done? What can I do? Escape will certainly depend as much on you as on me."

Reynolds was silent for a few moments. Then he arose and carefully examined the bars of the window in his cell.

"You must manage to get some files and saws in to me," he slowly and thoughtfully said.

"I'll try my best," said Ashton.

The conversation might have been continued longer, but for the sheriff putting in an appearance.

Having hired a conveyance, Ashton was driven back to Eagleton.

He then went to see Murdock and got him to purchase some files and saws.

The tools were shown to and approved by Ashton, after which Murdock took them home. His mother darkly comprehended what her son was about, and, asking no questions, did as he requested, and concealed the tools in the center of a loaf of bread, which she then baked.

Thus prepared, Murdock set off for the town where Reynolds was confined. Having stumbled across an unprincipled woman, he soon struck a bargain with her to convey the bread to the jail.

She deceived the jailer when he questioned her as to where the bread came from.

"I know him," she said, with a wave of her hand, "and a jolly good feller he is. I want him to have a taste of sweet, fresh bread."

And it all appearing innocent enough to the jailer—merely a feeling of sympathy for a boon companion—he took in the bread and gave it to Reynolds.

"Where'd this come from?" demanded the latter.

"A woman left it," at hearing which reply Reynolds tossed the bread from him.

At last, growing hungry, and tempted by the freshness of the bread, he took up and broke the loaf, and discovered the files and tiny saws.

"Ha!"

That was all, but it spoke volumes.

In less than a minute all the tools were safely hidden, only to be brought forth at night, and industriously used on the bars of the window.

On the second night he made great progress, and calculated that in two nights more he would be able to wrest the bars from their fastenings.

The second night after closed in dark and stormy.

"Just the kind of a night I want," muttered Reynolds, as he filed away, working steadily, save for a pause now and then to listen.

About eleven o'clock he wrenched out one of the bars; the others were nearly filed through, and, using the first as a lever, by midnight he had cleared away all the bars.

"Phew!"

He sat down on the cot and wiped the perspiration from his brow.

For about five minutes he sat resting himself and then

arose. Try as he would, he made so much noise as to frighten him, and, while half in and half out of the window, he paused to listen.

Someone was stirring. There could be no doubt about it. The cold sweat beads started out on his forehead.

It was now or never!

He poised himself. The jailer was rattling at the lock. He sprang. The jailer dashed into the cell.

A wild cry of warning rang through the jail; the jailer sprang to the window in time to see a dark form picking itself up from the ground.

Crack—crack!

Two flashes, and two bullets went swiftly hurtling toward the escaped prisoner. He staggered—the jailer was sure of that—then he wildly waved one hand above his head, uttered a defiant shriek, and sprang away into the darkness.

In five minutes a half dozen men were in swift pursuit. In fifteen minutes the leader yelled:

"There he is—there he is! Pounce on him—now."

CHAPTER XV.

THE RECEPTION.

It was one of the bitterest pills Ashton was ever compelled to swallow, when he learned that on the night of his absence from Eagleton a fire had occurred, that his company was the last to reach the spot, and that Ned Newcomb had covered himself with such honor.

Grinding his teeth, he muttered:

"Well, it won't happen very often in the future. Once this Reynolds ceases to bother us, I'll attend to your case, Ned Newcomb. And there'll be no slip another time. You'd have been stretched out by this time if it hadn't been for this trouble with Reynolds."

Though each of these young fellows sought to avoid the other, it was almost impossible for them not to meet in a town of the size of Eagleton, and each meeting only added fuel to Ashton's hatred. The calm and proud carriage of Ned Newcomb was exasperating to the highest degree.

Mr. Porter had been more than ever convinced of Ned's innocence by the manner, and his words to Mr. Weaver. In fact, the latter gentleman was more puzzled than ever.

"There is no doubt, Porter, that if he stands trial he will be convicted," said Mr. Weaver. "Still, I am more than half inclined to withdraw the charge."

"That you cannot very well do," said Mr. Porter dryly. "Remember, Weaver, that the young man has rights as well as yourself. You have brought this charge against him and he now demands that an investigation by trial shall ensue."

"Right. You will see, Porter, that he has a good lawyer. I will bear half the expense."

"Thank you, but I'll see that he is ably defended without any cost to you."

Singular, was it not, that the very man who had brought this charge against Ned was willing to pay a lawyer to help disprove the crime?

It was the result of a cold judgment of suspicious circumstances of struggling against unbounded admiration of a noble, and manly, and brave young fellow, who had, among other brave deeds, saved this man's daughter from an untimely death.

If the man who was prosecuting him could do so much, Mr. Porter could do more; so he felt, and so he subsequently acted.

That evening Mr. Porter, Joe, and Ned had a long conversation. During this, Ned disclosed the fact that he was not actually the son of old Sal Newcomb.

"Not her son?" said Mr. Porter. "Why have you concealed

the fact, Ned? Do you not know that the supposed relationship has detained you from the privilege of visiting many nice people?"

"I do," said Ned, flushing.

"Then why have you concealed it?"

"Because, to have revealed it, and disowned her, would have seemed to be treachery to one who has cared for me for years."

"And do you know who your parents were?"

"I do. They were people of good standing, socially and financially; my father died when I was but a few months old, my mother when I was three years of age. The property my father held had descended to him, and was entailed. My mother could not touch a cent of it, and was reduced to beggary, and died in destitution. Poor mother!" and a tear stood in Ned's eyes. "Oh, that she could have lived until I became of age. Then—then—how gladly would I have spent money on her, and given her every luxury and comfort."

"Then you will have property when you come of age?"

"I shall. It is now only a few months away."

"Ned, you are a noble fellow," said Mr. Porter in a husky voice. "I honor you for your devotion to Sal Newcomb, for not being ashamed to own a friend—however humble no matter what is said of her—who has done so much for you. It is not the way of the world at large. Most young men would have been ashamed of the connection, and would have deserted her."

Well did Ned feel repaid for all the insults and mortifications he had been subjected to on Sal's account, by these few genuine, honest, earnest words.

A few days later Ned received a dainty little note, written on perfumed paper, which read as follows:

"Mr. and Mrs. Porter respectfully request the pleasure of Mr. Ned Newcomb's presence, on Thursday evening next, at a birthday party in honor of their eldest daughter, Miss Minnie."

At first Ned decided not to go. But Joe urged the matter so strongly—and perhaps the knowledge that Winnie Weaver would be there had something to do with it—that Ned was induced, at any rate, to change his mind.

The evening came at last, and Ned, dressed up in a new suit for the occasion, really merited the compliment of being called "a handsome young fellow."

Winnie Weaver was there. And when her eyes encountered Ned's there was at first a surprised look, then one of pleasure, and she bowed and smiled.

At least she would not "cut him," thought Ned, gratefully. Other young ladies had held aloof from him, but the Porter sisters and Miss Weaver were more than kind.

"You must dance, Ned," said Joe Porter, decidedly, and somehow Ned found himself dancing, and enjoying the party, forgetful of the dark shadow hanging over him.

At last he met Winnie Weaver face to face. They talked a few minutes, and then Ned plucked up courage to ask her to dance the next lanciers with him.

"With pleasure," she answered, and he wrote his name in the blank opposite the dance. Then she moved away.

Ned waited for the dance with feverish impatience. It came in its turn.

The musicians were preparing for it, and the order had gone forth to "secure your partners for the lanciers!"

Ned knew where Winnie was sitting, and he worked his way toward her through the crowd. He was very near to her, when he saw Ashton also approaching her.

"This is our dance, Miss Weaver," said Ned, presenting his arm.

"I believe you promised me this lanciers," said Ashton, bending above the young lady.

"Oh, dear, how provoking! I've lost my programme," said Winnie, embarrassed at the situation.

Ashton endeavored to shoulder Ned out of the way. This Ned would not stand, and pressing nearer, he said, in a firm voice:

"Miss Weaver, you surely cannot have forgotten that you engaged yourself to me for this dance."

"You did not," said Ashton, addressing her instead of Ned. "I'll swear you promised me."

"Here is your name written down," urged Ned. "Pray, Miss Weaver, do not delay or we shall be late."

"Decide between us," said Ashton, in a hoarse voice. "Granted that there is a mistake, do you wish to dance with a gentleman or a cur?"

Winnie Weaver's pretty eyes flashed with indignation. She would not allow any one to be insulted in her presence.

"Your arm, please, Mr. Newcomb," and taking Ned's arm she sailed away, leaving Ashton discomfited and strangling with rage.

For a moment or two Ashton seemed rooted to the spot; then he cast one fearful look of hatred toward his successful rival, and left the house.

"Curse you, Ned Newcomb! Curse you, you are always crossing my path. But it is for the last time. Before the sun rises again you will be a corpse."

CHAPTER XVI.

A MADMAN.

When Ashton left the house of the Porters he was, to all intents and purposes, a madman. So great was his rage at Winnie Weaver's having decided the dispute as to the dance in favor of Ned Newcomb, that he had no fair idea of what he was actually doing.

He only knew that once again Ned Newcomb had triumphed over him, that he was burning for revenge, a revenge only to be satisfied by the death of his rival.

He turned his steps homeward, and secured a revolver, and with it concealed in his pocket, he sought the road over which Ned Newcomb must pass to reach his home.

There was murder in his heart and in his eye, and had Ned at that moment come in sight, he would, of a certainty, have received a pistol-bullet in his brain.

While moodily pacing to and fro at a deserted and lonely spot, Ashton failed to hear approaching footsteps until they were too close to admit of his trying to conceal himself.

"Ah, it's you, is it, Ashton? I was just wishing I'd see you."

The newcomer was Murdock, who now saw Ashton for the first time since having performed his mission of conveying the tools to Reynolds. He had loitered about the town until sure of the escape of Reynolds, and had just reached Eagleton that evening.

"Well?" demanded Ashton.

"He got away all right, I guess," said Murdock. "He got out last night. They discovered all about it before he had fairly got out of his cell, and it is certain that he was hit by a bullet the jailer sent after him. But he found cover somewhere, for they hadn't got him yet this morning, though they are still hunting him sharply."

"Then he may be caught even now?" said Ashton in an alarmed tone.

"It is possible. It was for that reason that I came back. In case he is taken now, he won't have the ghost of a show of escaping again, and therefore, we had better hold ourselves prepared to light out at a moment's notice."

"The devil!" exclaimed Ashton, reluctantly. "I hope he ain't taken again."

"So do I," said Murdock. "But Ashton, it's best always to

be prepared for the worst, and I think we'd better go and get the rest of the money we buried."

"No need of any such hurry as that, I guess," said Ashton. "Besides, I've got other business on hand just now."

"What is it?"

"Ned Newcomb will soon pass here on his way home," said Ashton, grimly, and, producing his revolver, he tapped it significantly.

"What has happened?" inquired Murdock.

Ashton told him as well as he was able, the recital of what had passed rousing him almost to frenzy.

"And I'll shoot him, yes, I'll do it," hissed Ashton in conclusion. "I'll shoot him now if I hang for it."

"Do you know what you are?" said Murdock. "You're a d—d fool!"

"What do you mean?" demanded Ashton angrily.

"Mean? Why, just what I say. You'd be an infernal fool to try a shot at him after what has just passed. They'd suspect you right away, and it would be blamed little satisfaction shooting him if it put a halter around your neck."

"But they will not suspect me," said Ashton, though not in a very convinced tone.

"Pshaw! Do you take Newcomb for so big a fool that he don't have any ideas about you? And if he suspects, ain't it likely he's said something to somebody? Come—come now, put up that shootin' iron and listen to reason. Come away from here. He must not know that you've been anywhere near the road he takes home."

Ashton allowed himself to be convinced and led away. He could easily understand that should Ned be shot, suspicion might attach to him.

"I don't give it up altogether, though," he hissed.

"That's for you to say," rejoined Murdock. "But my advice is, don't try any more violent means. We've been playing a dangerous game; Newcomb undoubtedly suspects us, and if his friends are on the lookout they would spot us the minute we tried those violent measures."

Ashton clutched his companion by the arm, and brought him to a halt.

"You have something in your mind, Murdock. There is something behind your words. What is it?"

"Poison."

They looked long and earnestly at each other after Murdock had uttered that one word in reply; then their hands met, and they walked on again, the silence unbroken for several blocks.

"Well, then," said Ashton, "I can only say, Murdock, that you're as good as a dozen ordinary fellows. But how is the stuff to be given him?"

"I'll rig up a plan in short order," was the reply. "But here you are at home. Now go in and go to bed, and don't dream of taking revenge on Newcomb with a revolver."

An hour later Ned went homeward by that road, and was whistling gaily as he passed the spot where Ashton had laid in wait to murder him; and little did Ned dream how his life had been saved by the accidental meeting of Ashton and Murdock.

Not a word concerning Ashton had passed between Ned and Winnie Weaver during the dance. There was a rankle in Ned's heart at being called a "cur," but he felt that this bright young girl had amply avenged him.

It was with a good deal of satisfaction that Ned afterward looked back to that evening, and remembered how promptly Winnie Weaver had decided in his favor.

Two weeks had passed since that night. During this time he had seen Ashton but once, and then they had met by chance in the street.

Ned had not noticed Ashton, but the latter could not refrain from scowling on the former; and then he muttered to himself:

"Well, the die is cast! You'll not bother me very long. In an hour the spell will commence!"

What was hidden beneath these strange words:

Did the letter which Ned found in the post-office have anything to do with . . .

Accompanying the letter was a small package, on opening which he found a handsome seal ring, reclining on a bed of purple velvet.

"Mr. Newcomb:—Will you accept this accompanying token of sympathy and friendship, a tribute as it is to a daring and courage that are grand. We shall watch to see you wear our little gift, and when the trial is over we will proclaim our identity.

Numerous Friends."

It was but natural that Ned should feel gratified at the receipt of the token and the letter. When he returned to the store he showed both to Joe.

"Try on the ring," suggested Joe.

Ned slipped it on his finger, and there leaving it, went about his work. Nearly an hour later he chanced to strike the plate of the ring against a counter. As he did so he felt a sharp pricking sensation inside of the ring. He took it off. In his finger was a tiny puncture, from which had emerged a speck of blood.

Ned examined the inner surface of the ring. It was highly polished and smooth as could be, with no trace of any sharp point to produce the puncture. Somewhat puzzled, yet attaching no importance to the fact, he slipped the ring on his finger again.

"I just saw Ashton pass," said Joe, coming back from the front of the store a short time later. "He peered in as he went by, as if he would have liked to get a glimpse of you."

"He does me honor," laughed Ned; "I do not care to see him."

"Nor I," added Joe. "The more I see of him the more convinced I become that he is an unprincipled scamp."

"Joe," and Ned spoke so suddenly and in such an altered voice as to startle his companion—"Joe, do you see anything strange in my appearance?"

"No. Why?"

"I feel so oddly, that's all. Every muscle in my body is twitching, and my eyeballs feel as if being pulled cross-eyed."

Long and earnestly Joe scanned Ned's face, and as he did so his own grew pale. Slowly but surely the color was deserting Ned's face, his eyes were taking on a strange, set look.

"Joe—Joe, something's wrong," said Ned, hurriedly. "My God! I'm freezing up inside. My blood is cold as ice. Go for a doctor, Joe—or send for one—and you stay by me."

Joe sent for a doctor and then returned to Ned's side. He had been gone but a moment—but such a change! Ned was of the hue of purest marble, his face was rigid in outline, his eyes fixed on vacancy. His lips moved.

"The sofa."

Joe understood; he wanted to lie down.

Half way to the sofa Ned suddenly reeled from his assisting hands; his shoulders struck squarely against the wall, and there he stood, stiff, motionless, silent. Joe caught up one of Ned's hands. It was so strangely cold that he released it with fright, and it fell heavily to its owner's side.

"Father—father!" cried Joe. "Come here, quick! Ned is dead!"

Ned seemed frozen, so stiff, and cold, and rigid was limb and muscle.

CHAPTER XVII.

REYNOLD'S ESCAPE.

"I surrender! For God's sake don't shoot!"

This exclamation had met the ears of the party pursuing

Reynolds, as they pounced down upon a human being whom they supposed was the escaped prisoner.

An expression of disgust escaped the jailer's lips as he discovered his mistake. He had taken an honest farmer for the escaped villain. But why had the farmer acted in such a suspicious manner gruffly demanded the jailer.

In trembling tones the frightened fellow admitted having met Reynolds, who had stopped him and robbed him of a revolver and a few dollars he had with him.

As Murdock had informed Ashton, the pursuing party had not captured Reynolds when he left the town a few hours after daylight, although they still kept up the search.

Reynolds had been struck by one of the jailer's bullets, fired at him from the window of the cell; it had entered the fleshy part of his leg, but though painful, did not materially interfere with his flight, which he kept up, pausing only to rob the farmer alluded to, until nearly daybreak.

He had deserted the main road fully an hour before, and was now on a rough and but little traveled by-road, running through a dense wood a portion of the time.

Just before day broke he plunged into the wood, and did not pause until fully a mile of timber and tangled undergrowth lay between him and the road.

No one who has not been similarly situated can for one instant imagine the desperation of a man thus fleeing for his life, forfeited to the terrible majesty of the laws of the land. A man pursued by Indians, knowing that capture means death, has a certain satisfaction in the reflection that he can sell his life dearly, and that his own death will come speedily. Consequently he does not suffer one tithe of the terror of the murderer whose capture means a no less certain death, though it does not come until he has had weeks, and perhaps months, to view its cold and inexorable and steady approach.

Reynolds flung himself down in the center of a thick clump of bushes, and here remained motionless for nearly an hour, resting himself and recovering his breath. His lips were grimly set, and a determined look was upon his face.

Something like a smile crossed his features as he examined the revolver he had robbed the farmer of. It was fully loaded, and would do excellent service at need.

Blood would surely be shed ere they could make a prisoner of him.

At length he laid the revolver on the ground within reach, then took out and opened a pocket knife, also taken from the farmer; his next proceeding was to expose his leg where the bullet had entered.

Wincing with pain, but uttering no sound, no moan or groan, he proceeded to trace the course of the bullet by pressing the flesh. He found where its course had ended, about an inch beneath the skin, opposite the point where it had entered.

With a fortitude worthy of a better man and a better cause, he cut into the flesh and extracted the bullet, then bound up the bleeding part with strips torn from his shirt, afterward wetting it with cool water from a brook which flowed near his hiding-place.

Nothing occurred to alarm him until the middle of the afternoon.

Then he aroused himself, grasped his deadly weapon more firmly, and with bated breath waited for the result, every nerve and muscle strained to its utmost tension, as the jailer and two assistants in the search approached the clump of bushes.

It was well for some, if not all of them, that they did not discover him, for the desperate man might have killed one or all of them before he could have been secured.

He could almost have touched them by stretching out his hand, so closely did they pass by him. They went onward without a suspicion of the nearness of the fugitive from justice.

Reynolds breathed free again. He was congratulating himself that his safety was now assured, when his very heart's blood was chilled by a peculiar and unmistakable sound.

The trio, who had but just passed, now darted back in the direction whence they had come.

"The sheriff has put a bloodhound on the track," he heard the jailer say.

The fugitive's heart sank within him. Discovery now was certain.

He cocked the revolver, gritted his teeth, and waited. There was no use of wasting his strength by fleeing now; he might as well meet the bloodhound here as anywhere, and his eyes gleamed with a deadly light as they peered off through the dark arches of the woods in the direction whence the bloodhound would come.

With fiendish red eyes and lowered head the bloodhound came loping along the trail, following the scent with an unerring instinct. He passed within sight of the jailer and the two others, but never deigned to notice them, and soon left them behind.

On he swiftly sprang, his yelping becoming more and more deep and fierce as the scent became fresher.

In a minute or two Reynolds would be at bay.

He awaited the supreme moment with a desperation that was fearfully calm, but as fearfully intense.

The animal finally emitted one long-continued, triumphant howl, and dove into the bushes.

A slight screen still separated Reynolds from the animal's sight, and the bloodhound paused for a moment to raise his head and sniff the air. Now was Reynolds' opportunity. He quickly aimed. The dog was about to spring; he had caught a glimpse of the prey he had run to earth.

Crack!

Crack!

The first bullet entered the bloodhound's eye, and penetrated to his brain. He fell dead in his tracks.

As Reynolds sprang to his feet he heard a wild shout fall from the jailer's lips. He had got rid of his canine enemy, but had betrayed his presence to his human pursuers.

With a snarl like that of a maddened tiger, Reynolds thrust the smoking revolver in his pocket and dashed away.

"If I can only keep clear of them for an hour," he muttered. "If I only can! By that time it will be dark, and I can cut across country. But if they do corner me——"

He compressed his lips grimly.

The sun was just sinking as he reached the edge of the woods. His pursuers were not more than a quarter of a mile behind him; he could easily hear their voices as they shouted to each other. Before him stretched away for nearly a mile a thick growth of corn, and into this he plunged at once. It was an excellent movement on his part, for his pursuers reasoned that he would hardly venture from the cover of the woods while daylight lasted, and instead of beating up the cornfield at once, plunged back into the depths of it again.

About nine o'clock he emerged into a lonely road, and judging his course by the stars, slowly worked back toward Eagleton, at last finding a refuge beneath the dancing platform in Chestnut Woods.

CHAPTER XVIII.

A TERRIBLE SITUATION.

"Ned Newcomb is dead!"

In an hour all Eagleton knew the sad news, and not one who heard it but had a kindly word to say of the gallant fellow. At least, excepting two people, Ashton and Murdock.

These two had met in Chestnut Woods the night of the party, on which night Murdock had dissuaded Ashton from his purpose of shooting Ned. Of what their conversation treated is best shown by the fact that next morning Murdock, with five hundred dollars in his pocket, started for New York, a city where anything can be obtained, no matter how evil, no matter how good.

Nothing that human ingenuity ever devised but can be obtained in that great city, containing so much that is good, so much that is bad.

Murdock had heard of just such a ring as Ned received, and had come in search of one. Naturally shrewd, and with plenty of money at his disposal, he soon ingratiated himself with the sort of people who would make for him what he wanted.

To all appearances the ring was as innocent as any other, yet by an ingenious contrivance attached to the stone set in the ring, the stone itself was capable of being depressed by a blow or by pressure, on which the needle darted forth from a tiny hole hardly visible to the naked eye. And that needle had been dipped into some deadly drug.

That letter had been written by Murdock in a disguised hand, and letter and package dropped into the post-office in the middle of the night, unseen by anybody.

"Ned Newcomb is dead!"

Sad news was this for Eagleton.

Joe Porter's tears fell fast, and free as he stood beside the cold, white, and silent body, prepared for the grave.

As the Porters had befriended Ned in life, they honored him in death. The body had been taken to Mr. Porter's house and was laid out in that gentleman's parlor.

"I will attend to his burial," Mr. Porter said, when questioned about it. "He has no family plot, and I shall, therefore, inter him in my own vault."

"He was a good boy," sobbed old Sal Newcomb. "A kinder-hearted, more noble lad never lived—never. And to die, when in a short while he would have been raised from poverty to wealth. Oh, Ned—Ned, my poor darling—oh, that I had only the right to a mother's grief; but I was not even related to you."

Bitterly did the poor woman grieve over Ned's untimely death.

"Good-by—Ned—good-by!" she sobbed, when they came to lead her away, and she bent and kissed the pallid face and tenderly wiped from it the tears which had fallen on it. "Good-by—Ned—good-by; farewell forever!"

Then the coroner and the doctors came. Ned had died so suddenly that it was necessary to hold a formal inquest, although each and all were satisfied from the symptoms and general appearance, that death was due to heart disease.

"Heart disease."

Such was their mutual conclusion.

"Well, Ned, good-by," said one of the doctors, with a tear in his eye. "I'm almost as sorry as if I had lost one of my own children."

"How very life-like he looks," said another, as he bent over the body. Inadvertently he laid his hand on Ned's forehead; then, purposely laid his hand on one of Ned's; and finally on Ned's chest; then raised one of Ned's hands and watched it fall heavily back.

"What's the matter, doc?" asked the coroner, curiously and interestedly.

"I hardly know myself," was the puzzled reply. "But do you know there's something unusual in his appearance and feel. There don't seem to be the usual 'rigor' about this body."

"Surely you don't mean that there is life in him yet?"

"I'd hardly be prepared to say that," was the cautious reply, for the doctor did not care to make a mistake and be laughed at by his fellow physicians. "Have either of you ever seen a case of syncope?"

"Suspended animation, in other words," said the coroner. "Yes, I have, and this case is not like syncope. So say no more about it, doc. Don't let such a foolish story get started, for Heaven's sake," and the coroner's laugh was joined in by all but this one.

"Well, I'm satisfied that he is dead," said the latter, after lifting and letting Ned's hand fall once or twice. And they all went away, and a living man was laid in his coffin, ready for the grave!

Yes, despite the coroner's assertion, Ned was not dead, but had enthralled every limb and muscle and nerve into a rigor like that of death itself, leaving his senses unimpaired, acute, able to take cognizance of all that was passing about him.

Oh! what agony it was to lie there and hear people passing around him, to be prepared for burial, to hear kind friends bewailing his fate, to hear the sobs of old Sal Newcomb, to hear the stifled emotion of faithful Joe Parker, and be unable by so much as the winking of the eye to let them know the truth.

It was horrible!

A wild hope had entered his heart when this one physician spoke about the strangeness of his appearance. Perhaps an examination would follow, and they would save him. How eagerly he listened to all that followed!

When he heard the last words, knew that they gave him up for dead, and heard their retreating footsteps he struggled fearfully to break the awful spell.

In vain! Naught on earth could now save him.

* * * * *

The band was playing a mournful funeral dirge. The company Ned had commanded, with crape on their arms, were sadly following him to the grave. They passed the truck house on the way; it was hung with black in his memory.

Horrible—oh! so horrible!

Ned, closed up in his casket, and that in the black-plumed hearse, was conscious of it all.

He felt the hearse halt. They were at the vault! He felt the casket taken out and rested on wooden horses. Then the cover was removed, and all who wished filed about the head of the casket for a last look at gallant Ned Newcomb.

Now was his last chance.

Oh! how he struggled. He tried to raise his hand, to move his lips, to twitch his eyelids, to move the skin on his forehead, and was still uselessly trying when the cover was shut down, excluding him forever from the world.

"Ashes to ashes, dust to dust!"

He heard the handful of dust fall on his narrow prison-house with a hollow, echoing sound. He was raised; there was a grinding sound as he was shoved upon a shelf in the vault, then came the heavy clang of the iron door, and Ned was alone with death!

CHAPTER XIX.

THE DEAD ALIVE.

The heavy door of the vault closed with a dismal clang. The echo reverberated hollowly through the gloomy place, gradually diminishing in volume until it finally died away into nothingness. At last the faint echo died away, there fled from Ned's heart the vain hope he had until now cherished, and inwardly he commended his soul to Him who rules over all.

Nought now remained for Ned but a lingering death. Better, far better, he told himself, that he had actually died.

It was horrible to the last degree to be cooped up in that small place, knowing that death must come, and awaiting it with a dumb despair, unable to avoid the end in any manner.

Ned's brain was as clear as it had ever been, and now all hope gone, this reflection—crossing his mind as he conned the situation—gave him a melancholy pleasure.

"At least I shall not starve to death; death cannot be long delayed, for I shall soon exhaust the air contained in my narrow prison house."

And Ned waited, and at last began to experience some distress in breathing, as would be the case were the air becoming vitiated.

There is an old saw that "it is an ill wind which blows nobody good." It proved true in at least this instance. The undertaker had palmed off on Mr. Parker as perfectly sound a casket in which there was at least one immense crack, which he had artfully concealed by draping lace over it. And this crack afforded enough fresh air to sustain life, as Ned was then living.

At last Ned reached the conclusion that he was constantly obtaining fresh air from some source, at which he began to speculate as to how long he would exist under present conditions. Then a vague wormed its way into his heart; something might happen—by some train of circumstances he might yet be saved.

He had no means of gauging the lapse of time, and after a period which might have been weeks, days, or only hours, but still long enough for hope to give way to gloomy despair, he mentally prayed that he might be granted strength to drive vain hopes from his mind and to prepare himself for the worst.

Still, self-preservation is an instinct so strongly implanted in humanity that, try as he would, a beggarly little feeling that there was still a chance, would sneak into his mind and destroy his profound meditations concerning that mysterious and unknown world on the brink of which he then was.

"I must be resigned," he mentally told himself. "It is inevitable—so let me calmly meet my end."

And resigned he was, though it was a sullen kind of resignation.

Then he thought of his friends. How badly they would feel did they ever learn that he had been buried alive! And, forgetting himself for a little, he prayed that they might never know.

He must have slept at last, for there was a suspension of his faculties, and a long, blank space.

"It were better had I never awoke," he thought. "Well, I must bear my troubles like a man; at least, I have this consolation, that I am so much nearer the end."

It would have been impossible to analyze Ned's feelings. He did not wish to die, but, considering that inevitable, he really wished that the end would speedily come. Yes, he was resigned fully at last.

But—Ned's brain underwent a sickening sensation—what was the sensation—what was the meaning of that queer tingling feeling in his veins? His blood was beginning to circulate again.

Half an hour passed, and then, trembling inwardly, he made an experiment. Could he move his finger? So he had asked himself, and trying, succeeded.

He was now actually alive, the syncope had been broken. In the first moment of his intense excitement he raised himself, but fell back heavily after bringing his head violently into contact with the cover of the casket. He laid there for some time more than half stunned.

Then gradually he recovered the use of his senses, and—his heart almost stopped beating—surely he was not mistaken, he could hear footsteps moving about the vault.

"Ned—poor Ned!"

Ned almost suffocated. Unless he was mistaken it was Joe Porter's voice.

His lips parted, he tried to call out. But the horrible spell

was not entirely gone from him yet, and his organs of speech were still enthralled. How terrible it would be if the opportunity were to pass without his being able to use it.

Joe had turned away; his footsteps were receding.

It was a terrible moment of suspense.

Oh, how Ned struggled. But he could not speak. Then he tried to kick, but the space at his feet was too small. He caught his breath and held it; he grew red in the face, his eyes began to start from their sockets, the veins swelled and stood out like whipcords on his forehead, and—

"Joe—Joe!"

When he released his pent-up breath, the wild-toned, agonized word burst from his throat as the ball leaves the cannon's mouth.

Joe Porter, at the threshold of the vault, paused as if shot, while every vestige of color fled from his face. Could he be dreaming? Surely the dead could not speak! He listened a minute—surely his fancy must have tricked him:

"Joe—Joe!"

A single bound placed himself beside the casket.

"My God, Ned, are you alive?"

His voice was strained and harsh; it was impossible to have recognized it as Joe's so strangely it sounded.

"Alive? Yes! But I'll be dead soon if not released," was the smothered reply.

Now that Ned was full of animation, and filled his lungs at each expiration, the air within the casket was becoming rapidly exhausted, and the crack did not repair the damage altogether.

"Courage!" cried Joe Porter, and sprang from the vault. In less than two minutes he was back with a screwdriver; in another ten minutes the casket had been drawn out and its cover unscrewed, and Ned was lifted out.

Then, limp as a dish rag, Joe Porter sank down, making a seat of that which had so lately been Ned's prison.

It was fully a quarter of an hour before either could control himself sufficiently to speak intelligibly. Then Joe explained his presence there.

"The sexton was to wall up the hole into which this casket had been placed; father kept the key of the vault and sent me over with it so that the sexton could get in. Great Heavens, what a narrow escape!" and with a shudder Joe wiped away the profuse perspiration on his forehead.

When Joe began to realize the truth in all its aspects he questioned Ned as to how they should break the news to his friends.

"And Ashton—won't he be mad?" said Joe, a gleam of joy in his eyes as he contemplated Ashton's discomfiture.

This chance mentioning of Ashton's name made Ned thoughtful.

"Joe," he finally said, "I am satisfied of one thing—that the cause of this was that ring. Have you never heard of poisoned rings? And it was sent me by Ashton, together with that letter."

"The villain!" gasped Joe.

For over an hour the two friends conversed in earnest tones, then the casket was screwed up and returned to its proper place, and then Joe departed, locking Ned in the vault. Joe had got tired of waiting for the sexton; so he told that individual when he called at the store late in the day.

"I will be there to let you in at nine o'clock to-morrow morning," said Joe, in conclusion. "You must excuse me now, for I'm very busy."

Not far from the hour of midnight Joe opened the vault door. Ned came out, the door was locked again, and the two friends gained Mr. Porter's house without having been observed by anyone.

And the next day the sexton walled up the opening before the

end of the empty casket, and put up a marble slab bearing the inscription:

"NED NEWCOMB.
"He wore his honors modestly."

CHAPTER XX.

POISON AGAIN.

Ashton was jubilant at having finally rid himself of his old enemy. He shook Murdock by the hand, and declared him to be the shrewdest fellow of the age.

"That ring business was just the cheese," he said, enthusiastically, after returning from seeing Ned laid away in the vault.

"Then you are now satisfied that it was better than shooting him, as you proposed doing on the night of the party?"

"Far better. I cave, Murdock. I see you were right; it might have proved a nasty bit of business, my shooting him. Well, he'll never bother us again. I wish we had Dan Reynolds fixed as surely. By the way, I wonder what has become of Reynolds. I haven't heard of him being captured, have you?"

"No," was Murdock's reply. "But there's one thing, Ashton, that I think had best be done, and that is, keep ourselves prepared for flight."

"Pshaw! I can see no reason for any alarm. We have nothing to fear from anyone except Reynolds, and he may be at the north pole by this time, for all we know."

"Very well," and Murdock shrugged his shoulders. "I don't think myself that we are pressed by any danger, only I think it's prudent to keep prepared for getting away at a lively pace the minute it should become necessary."

Presently the two villains parted company. They had another handshake in congratulation over the success of their villainy, a few merry jokes about what they would do in case they saw Ned's ghost—murderers were always haunted by their victims, according to one of the articles of Murdock's religious belief—and then they parted to meet the next night in Chestnut Woods, Murdock in the meantime to drive across country and learn, if he could, what had become of Reynolds, neither of them having any idea that that personage was at that moment concealed beneath the dancing platform.

"And so you could hear nothing of him?" said Ashton, he and Murdock having met near the platform the next night. As he spoke they were advancing toward the platform, and were fairly seated before Murdock replied:

"Nothing at all, further than that they ran him to earth with a bloodhound. He killed the brute, and then ran through the woods, having but a couple of minutes' start of them. They thought they had him sure, but he gave them the slip somehow."

"Where was he making for? Have you any idea?" asked Ashton.

"He was coming in this direction."

"Curse the luck. I hope he don't turn up here."

"Softly," said Murdock, in a meaning tone. "That's just what we both want—to see him turn up here."

"Why?" demanded Ashton.

"Because we will then know precisely where we stand, and—"

Murdock sunk his voice to a whisper, and whatever were the words he uttered, only his companion understood their import.

"I believe you're right," said Ashton, a minute after Murdock had ceased speaking. "Yes, it would be best for Reynolds to come here, after all. I'd like to welcome him now."

"What's that?"

As this exclamation fell from Murdock's lips, he sprang to

his feet in evident alarm. Something, or somebody, was moving beneath the platform.

"We are in for it," he gasped. "Our conversation has been overheard."

"No need of running, boys," said a gruff voice, as a dark figure crawled from beneath the platform. "I'm after that welcome, Ashton, and Heaven knows I need it in the worst way, for not a thing but water has passed my lips in three days."

"Reynolds!" exclaimed Ashton, and it was echoed by Murdock.

"I didn't dare go out in search of food," said Reynolds, "and, consequently, I'm almost starved to death. I wasn't sure where to find either of you, so I waited until you should turn up. Here, Ashton, you sit down here by me to keep me company while Murdock gets me something to eat. Be lively, too."

There was a hidden threat in the words and manner of Reynolds, and Ashton said:

"Yes—hurry up, Murdock; don't be longer than you can help."

Murdock was gone but a short while, returning with a big piece of cheese and several pounds of crackers, and a couple of pounds of raw ham, all of which was eagerly snatched by the half-famished man. The ham, sliced up and eaten with the crackers, Reynolds said, was the most toothsome thing he had ever eaten.

When he had taken off the edge of his hunger, he told them the particulars of his escape up to the time of his finding refuge beneath the platform.

"Now, here I am, boys," he said, in conclusion. "And the next question is—what is to be done? I'll tell you. I'm a-goin' to lay shady here until my wound heals. Meantime, you fellows will fetch me grub every night. When I'm sound again I want a little more spondulix, and then I'm off; and I'll never stop until I'm safe in Texas—on that you can go your last copper. Ah, well, I see you're anxious to be off, so I won't detain you. Tra-la-la, boys; pleasant dreams. By-the-by, when you come to-morrow night bring me something in the shape of a pillow, and I'll be much obliged."

Ashton smiled grimly, and in a low tone said:

"He's inclined to be funny. Well, perhaps it's best he should have his fun now; he couldn't after a very few hours."

"Ha—ha! I've got them in my power," laughed Reynolds. "I can work 'em as I please."

"You'll attend to the poison, Murdock," said Ashton, even as the faint echoes of the other's laugh reached their ears.

"I'll see to it to-morrow," was the reply. "But I'll have to be devilish cautious, you know."

Nearly a week had passed, however, and though they had gone nightly to meet Reynolds, they had not carried into execution their dastardly scheme of poisoning him. Murdock had hesitated about getting the poison, putting it off from day to day.

"Well, then, get it outside of the town," said Ashton at last, completely out of patience. "It's equally as dangerous buying such a lot of stuff every day."

"I guess it would be better to buy the poison elsewhere," said Murdock. "I'll do it to-morrow. By-the-way, he'd better leave there to-night; there's a picnic in the afternoon and a dance to-morrow night in Chestnut Woods."

"Where can he go?"

"Up by the cemetery is as good a place as I know of. The woods back of it are very thick, and no one ever goes into them."

Reynolds grumbled at being compelled to change his quarters, but finally accompanied them over the mile of ground that intervened between the cemetery and Chestnut Woods.

The following day the poison was obtained at a distant town, in which Murdock was unknown. A bottle of liquor was liberally dosed with the drug, and then with a package of food

and the bottle the two conspirators against Reynolds' life trudged on toward the cemetery.

"Ah—ha! So you didn't forget a bottle of the old stuff," said Reynolds, as he eagerly took the bottle of poisoned liquor. "Well, here's good luck to us all," and putting the bottle to his lips he took a heavy pull at its contents.

Then taking the food he began to eat. Five minutes passed, and then he suddenly ceased eating. What was the meaning of that peculiar sensation stealing over him? The blood was coursing wildly through his veins and he felt as if on fire. His eyeballs were scorching and withering in his head. His head was becoming light and giddy. His muscles were beginning to twitch spasmodically. His stomach was rolling and tossing as if it was on the point of turning inside out.

Like a thunderbolt the truth seemed to strike him. Like lightning his rage was aroused.

He turned on them with the ferocity of a tiger.

"Curse you!" he hissed. "You have poisoned me. Speak, is it not so?"

Shivering with fear, they recoiled. They could see his eyeballs glow in the darkness like those of a wild animal. They were unprepared for this, for they had expected to see the poison more swiftly—had not dreamed of even the briefest space of time between the discovery of its effect and the fatal results.

Frothing at the mouth, Reynolds hurled himself forward. "Die, you treacherous cur!" he hissed, grasping Ashton's throat with one hand, and with the other presenting a revolver at his head.

CHAPTER XXI.

NED AMONG FRIENDS.

The female portion of Mr. Porter's household had long since retired, and when Joe and Ned entered they encountered no living person until they reached the library, where Mr. Porter was awaiting their coming.

Arising, the gentleman took Ned by the hand, and gazed at him earnestly and curiously.

"I could hardly believe it when Joe told me. I thought he must have taken leave of his senses. But this is surely the flesh and blood Ned Newcomb come to life again."

"Flesh and blood surely," said Ned, with a smile. "But perhaps as you've gone to the trouble of preparing me some lunch, you'll allow me to make an attack on it?"

"Certainly—certainly! It'll be quite a treat to see a man eat who has just been nicely buried. But—" seeing Ned's face become grave, "I'll not joke any more; it must have been a horrible experience."

Very little further was said until after Ned had finished eating. Then he and Joe and Mr. Porter drew their chairs closely together.

"That ring, Mr. Porter, the one with the stone; you have it, I suppose?"

"Yes, I kept it as a token to remember you by."

"You did not attempt to wear it?"

"No. But why?"

"If you had, you too would have been buried alive if my surmises are correct."

"Indeed!" said the astounded gentleman. "For Heaven's sake, explain yourself! What is it you so darkly hint at? What can you mean?"

"That the ring was poisoned, and was sent me by an enemy," said Ned, solemnly.

Mr. Porter could not believe it.

"Give me the ring, please. We will experiment a little," said Ned.

After getting the best possible light on what he was doing, Ned pressed the stone of the ring, at the same time watching the inside.

"There's the needle that pricked me!" he cried in a low tone. "Can you see it, Mr. Porter? Can you, Joe?"

"I can," said Joe promptly.

"And you, Mr. Porter?"

"I must confess that I cannot. But—hold! I have a magnifying glass around somewhere. Look in that drawer, Joe. Ah! put your hand on it the first thing, hey? Now let me look! Yes—I do see something—a needle—and it is wet with some liquid substance."

"Good!" said Ned. "So far I am borne out in my conclusion. Now for an experiment. Do you mind trying it on Tabby yonder?" pointing to a half grown cat sleeping on a rug near by.

For reply Joe brought the cat and placed her on the table. Ned put the ring far enough over one of her paws to be able to puncture her flesh with the tiny needle. In less than two minutes the cat was stretched out before them, apparently dead.

"I was as much of a corpse in appearance as the cat, I suppose," said Ned.

"Yes."

"Well, as I came back to life, so will she."

Mr. Porter was dumbfounded. There was no longer any reason to doubt that Ned's life had been attempted by some enemy.

"That ring must have cost something," said Mr. Porter, thoughtfully.

"True. And who, sir, is there in Eagleton who has any reason to hate me—but one—who could possibly have the amount of money this cost?"

"You refer to Ashton?"

"I do," said Ned firmly. "Loth though I am to suspect the son of so respectable a man as Mr. Ashton, there is no other person on whom a shadow of suspicion could rest."

It was nearly daylight when the party broke up. Ned was taken to Joe's room. Mrs. Porter alone was taken into the secret, and nobody else was allowed to go anywhere near Joe's room for the time being. The servants and the young ladies were curious, and wondered what was on the tapis, but their curiosity availed them nothing.

Tabby was missed, and not coming to light, it was taken for granted that she had deserted them. On the contrary, however, she was under Ned's care, and as he prophesied, finally emerged from the spell of the potent and mysterious drug.

Meanwhile Joe Parker had not been idle. Taking the note which had accompanied the ring, he had gone to all the stationery shops in Eagleton, and finally he stumbled across some paper exactly similar to that on which the note had been written.

Making some lame excuse, he asked for the names of those who purchased any of this particular lot of paper. Among other names mentioned was that of Murdock.

"Ha—ha!" thought Joe, as he left the store. "I'm on the trail at last. Murdock is the man who bought the paper. Now to see who penned the words."

He got hold of some of Ashton's writing and compared the two.

"He didn't write it, that's sure," Joe finally decided. "Now to get a scrap of Murdock's penmanship."

Let a man attempt as he may to disguise his own handwriting, it is impossible to so successfully do it that a close scrutiny will not reveal the truth.

"Murdock wrote that note!" said Joe positively, as he laid both specimens of writing before his father and Ned. "But

Ashton was behind him all the same. Ashton is an archfiend."

Joe had made another discovery—that very night Ashton took his way to Chestnut Woods. This night he determined to haunt the woods, and learn, if possible, whom he met there.

"And I'll go with you," said Ned, arising.

And off they went, forgetful of the fact that on this night there was to be a dance in the woods, which were gaily lighted, and through the arches of which rolled the loud notes of the brass band, to whose time the merry dancers kept their feet moving.

* * * * *

In less than a second a bullet would have gone crashing into Ashton's brain had not the muscles of Reynolds's arm been violently contracted by a passing spasm. His hands were drawn up almost to his shoulders, and his fingers, after gripping tightly, suddenly flew open—allowing the pistol to fall—after which they bent backward until their tips almost touched the back of his hand.

Ashton seized the opportunity to strike Reynolds a violent blow in the face, and then he bounded swiftly from the spot, followed by Murdock.

Panting and breathless, they paused several hundred yards from the spot, and bending their heads, listened intently to hear if he was pursuing.

Reynolds had fallen, and at that moment lay writhing in the most terrible agony, and cursing Ashton and Murdock in a manner to make a chance listener's blood run cold. Pursue them? No, that would be impossible; he was too near death's door for that.

"There can be no question about its doing its work?" said Ashton, in a half frightened tone.

"No," Murdock answered. "Give it a little time. In ten minutes he'll be as stiff as Ned Newcomb was."

For nearly half an hour they crouched there, waiting until they dared venture back. It would be necessary to secure the pillow and blanket, since they might lead to detection.

"You go, Murdock, I'll wait here for you," said Ashton, finally.

It took some little time to get Murdock to consent to going alone. But at last he started off.

He had been gone about five minutes when Ashton heard him coming floundering back; as he drew nearer, Ashton could hear Murdock groan and he started up in wild alarm.

Another minute of intense suspense, and then Murdock reeled to where Ashton was, uttered a wild, inarticulate cry, and sank insensible at Ashton's very feet.

CHAPTER XXII.

A FRIGHTENED WRETCH.

It will be remembered that Ned and Joe Porter started for Chestnut Woods, intending to lie in wait and observe, if possible the meeting they felt morally sure would take place between Ashton and Murdock.

They were not far from the woods when the sound of music and merriment which drifted to their ears, caused Joe to exclaim:

"By thunder, there was a picnic here this afternoon, and now they are dancing! I forgot all about it. Well, our cake, Ned, is all dough, I am afraid, for they would never attempt to meet in the woods to-night. What's to be done? Shall we go back home?"

"Let me think a moment," said Ned. "No; we won't go home yet," he said after a moment's reflection. "Instead of that,

we'll stroll up in the neighborhood of Ashton's house; we may see him come out and be able to follow him."

"Good idea," assented Joe, at once falling in with this proposition; and the two young fellows at once strode away toward the place mentioned.

Had they known the precise minute when Ashton would emerge their arrival could not have been timed with greater nicety.

"Just in the nick of time," said Joe. "There he goes now; that's him."

"Not too fast," said Ned, in a low tone, laying a detaining hand on Joe's arm. "He must not suspect that he's being followed."

So careful were they in their movements that Ashton did not discover them, although he looked behind him more than once because of the guilty fear in his heart.

The two friends saw the meeting occur between Ashton and Murdock, and cautiously followed in their wake, but without dreaming of the terrible sight so soon to meet their gaze.

"They appear to be heading for the cemetery, Ned," said Joe.

"So they do," assented the former, in a puzzled tone. "What can they be about that brings them up here at night?"

"Give it up," said Joe. "We can only wait here and see," Ned nodded.

The two friends grew more and more puzzled when they saw Ashton and Murdock cross the cemetery and make for the woods.

The monuments affording them a cover, they drew nearer to the persons they were following. When the villains finally entered the woods, Ned and Joe paused.

What should they do? Go forward into the darkness of the woods, and possibly stumble unexpectedly on the others? Or should they remain where they were, and allow themselves to be governed by circumstances?

"Which shall it be, Ned?" finally asked Joe, in a low tone.

"Let us wait a few minutes at the very least," was the reply, "and keep your ears open, Joe, for just now they are of more use than eyes."

"They are wide open."

They had not stood there long when they faintly heard the savage words of Dan Reynolds as he accused the conspirators of poisoning him. And then, a minute or so later, they heard the hasty flight of Ashton and Murdock, after the former had so narrowly escaped death at the hands of the infuriated Reynolds.

"Ah!" exclaimed Ned. "They came here to meet a third person. What say you, Joe?"

"I believe you're right," was the reply. "But why are they taking to their heels?"

"That's a mystery—"

"Hush!" and Joe suddenly interrupted Ned. "Listen! Do you hear anything?"

"Yes—I hear—"

"Something like the moaning of a human being?"

"Yes; that's just what is it."

"They have committed murder, then," said Joe, excitedly. "It's somebody who has learned something and they decoyed him here, intending by his death to destroy all evidence of their former crimes."

It was a shrewd guess, and as the reader is aware, was not far from the truth.

Instantly the two friends plunged into the woods, and guided by the moans, which grew louder and more distinct every moment, they rapidly neared the spot where Reynolds was lying. At that instant he was seized by a terrible convulsion, and his arms and legs began to wildly saw the air, and thrash the earth.

They suddenly came upon Reynolds. It was so dark that all

they could see was the dark outline of a human form on the ground, writhing in agony.

"What has happened? What is the matter?" asked Ned quickly.

"Poison!" Reynolds faintly gasped.

Both recoiled with an exclamation of horror.

But in an instant Ned was himself. Perhaps it was not too late to save the man. He sprang forward and knelt by his side.

"Open your mouth!" said Ned, authoritatively. "Lie quiet and do not bite me. I want to make you vomit, and that may save your life."

Reynolds opened his mouth and Ned promptly thrust his fingers into the poisoned man's mouth, and finally touched his throat. At once followed a spasmodic retching, and following the withdrawal of Ned's hand came up a portion of the contents of Reynolds' stomach.

"Again!" said Ned.

He succeeded in unloading Reynolds' stomach of a portion of its contents. At once the beneficial results were visible. That horrible inward burning became more modified, the convulsions became less severe, and finally ceased.

Death was conquered, for the present at least.

"If you had only known enough to have caused yourself to vomit you would have been all right," said Ned. "How do you feel now?"

"Easier," said Reynolds, "but"—as he found himself too weak to rise—"d—d weak!"

And then he burst forth into a torrent of curses on the heads of those who had poisoned him.

Joe nudged Ned as Reynolds mentioned the names of Ashton and Murdock.

"Why did they try to kill you?" asked Ned, and eagerly bent over Reynolds to hear his reply.

"Because I knew too much about 'em, curse 'em! But now I'll hang 'em both if I swing myself," he hissed angrily.

"You know, then, that they tried to kill Ned Newcomb?"

"I can prove it," hissed Reynolds. "But who are you? How do you know anything about it?"

Before Ned could make any reply Joe laid a hand on his arm.

"You told me to keep my ears open and I've done so. Don't you hear something—footsteps? They're coming back."

Listening, Ned heard the footsteps of someone approaching, and on the impulse of the moment glided in their direction.

Murdock had not relished this return all alone, and as he neared the spot his steps became slower, and finally he halted completely; for several minutes he listened, but no sound reached his ears, for Joe had suppressed his own breathing, and had warned Reynolds to make no noise.

Murdock's cowardly heart suggested a light to show him what was before him, and he struck a match. After it was burning freely he raised it above his head that its rays might be cast further. Then, glancing ahead, a fearful pallor swept over his face, he became frozen with terror, for the glare of the match lighted up what he supposed was the face of a dead man, but in reality that of the living Ned Newcomb.

With a howl of mortal terror, as the match expired he turned and fled, to drop in a faint as he reached the side of his rascally employer.

CHAPTER XXIII.

TRIUMPH OF THE RIGHT.

Ned had uttered no word as Murdock stood before him; it might have destroyed the illusion under which he saw the vil-

lain was laboring; Ned only gazed at him in a stern, fixed way, something as an avenging angel might have done.

When Murdock fled, Ned's first impulse was to follow at his heels and confront Ashton. On reflecting, however, that this would expose the fact that he still lived, he turned about and strode back to the side of the poisoned man.

"We must try and get him to your house, Joe," said Ned, in a tone which evidenced his having decided on a course to follow. "Do you think you can walk, supported by us two?"

"I can," hissed Reynolds, "if it is to take me where I can make sure of getting square with them fellows."

"You shall certainly have the chance," said Ned, aware that his own vindication would follow through what this man would disclose.

"Help me up, then."

They assisted him to his feet, and after much hard labor got him to the Porter's house. Mr. Porter was in bed and asleep, but Joe aroused him, and then departed in quest of a physician.

Ned was left alone with Reynolds for a few minutes; but when the rascal began to talk Ned silenced him.

"Say nothing until you have competent witnesses about you."

Mr. Porter having hastily dressed, now put in an appearance. A few minutes later, Joe returned with a physician, the one who had ventured an opinion that Ned's body looked different from that of most corpses.

At sight of Ned he started back aghast. It was all explained to him at once, though it was some minutes before he could thoroughly digest the facts. As he moved around he would ever and anon cast a glance at Ned, but it was not until he had been in the room fully fifteen minutes that he showed—by advancing to shake the young man by the hand—that he had fully recovered his equilibrium of mind.

He was just beginning to make an intelligent examination into the condition of Reynolds when Joe entered again, having gone out after the village magistrate.

"Well, doc, how is it?" asked Reynolds, coolly. "Will I live?"

"One question first. How do you feel inside?"

"Why, when I breathe, the air seems to strike against my ribs."

"Try to drink this swallow of water," placing a tumbler to his lips.

For a minute afterward the doctor was silent, and then he said:

"You may as well know the truth. Inside of twenty-four hours you will be a dead man."

Reynolds paled a little, but kept up the undaunted front he had assumed.

"I suppose you're the 'squire," he said, "come to hear what I've got to say?"

The 'squire bowed, and sat down beside the sofa on which Reynolds was lying; in his hand were pencil and paper.

"Be careful to tell the exact truth," he warned Reynolds. "Now go ahead."

Now that he knew he was dying and had nothing to fear from the gallows, Reynolds told who he was, that he had committed murder, fled from New York, and finally reached Eagleton. This was followed up by the story of his relations with Ashton and Murdock; their giving him the money, stolen by Ashton from the safe of the Iron Works (a large sum of the easily identified money was found on Reynolds' person); his imprisonment and their assisting him to escape; and finally their giving him the poisoned liquor.

The gentlemen who had listened to this confession glanced from one to the other.

"There is but one course to follow, gentlemen," said the 'squire, "and that is to arrest Ashton and Murdock at once."

"Right!" said Mr. Porter, crossing the room to take Ned by

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"Right!" said Mr. Porter, crossing the room to take Ned by

the hand. "My boy, God only knows how pleased I am at your vindication—at receiving this evidence that my confidence was not misplaced."

* * * * *

Ashton was greatly alarmed when Murdock fainted at his feet. His heart was in a flutter of mingled excitement and fear. At one moment he was on the point of deserting Murdock and flying the town at once; at another he was for dashing back and learning what Murdock had seen; at another, he was slapping Murdock's hands and face to recall him to consciousness, that he might learn the nature of the danger which he felt was menacing them.

It was some minutes before Murdock recovered consciousness, and even then Ashton could gain no intelligible answer to any of his queries.

Haggard-faced and wild-eyed, Murdock no sooner reached his feet than he staggered onward, his only desire seeming to be to put as great a distance between himself and that spot as speedily as possible.

"What is the matter?" asked Ashton; but the only reply he could extract from the other, were the agonized, entreating words:

"Come on—come on—come on!"

It was some time after, and they were some distance from the cemetery, before Ashton could persuade Murdock to pause, and then he succeeded only by grasping Murdock's shoulder firmly and forcibly compelling him to do so.

"Come, now, I want to know what is up," he said gruffly.

"I've seen him," gasped Murdock.

"Seen who?"

"Him!"

"Who do you mean by him?"

"Ned Newcomb."

"Impossible!" said Ashton hoarsely. "Ned Newcomb is dead."

"I know that well enough," said Murdock. "I saw him dead, but standing straight before me in the woods up there."

Ashton was ghastly pale now. He had been too well educated to believe in the supernatural, but Murdock's positiveness staggered him. Common sense reassured him finally, and he tried to get Murdock to accompany him back to the woods, but in vain.

"No—no," cried Murdock, shuddering violently; "there is not gold enough in the world to tempt me."

"But you must go back."

"I won't," was the flat rejoinder.

"Suppose we neglect to do so and it results in our being hung?" said Ashton.

"Then let 'em hang."

Murdock again started onward, and Ashton—not caring to return alone to the cemetery—moodily followed him, until they found themselves in the village streets.

So wrapped up were they in their own gloomy thoughts that they did not observe or hear the approach of three men. Perhaps they would not have endeavored to avoid them anyhow, having no means of knowing that they were the village magistrate and two constables then on their way to Ashton's house.

As the two parties drew near each other, one of the constables suddenly spoke to his companions in a low tone.

"It's my belief we've dropped on our birds in company," he said. "That's Ashton and Murdock, or I'm greatly mistaken."

Ashton and Murdock stepped aside to let the others pass. But the latter wheeled around in front of them, and, as a heavy hand was laid on the shoulders of the young murderers, they were told sternly to consider themselves prisoners.

So thoroughly unmanned had Murdock been made by his sight of a supposed rambling dead man that he weakly caved

without an attempt at resistance. Ashton, however, showed fight, until he received a hard rap on the head, which brought him into submission.

"Why do you dare to arrest me?" he asked.

"You'll learn soon enough," was the reply, "that is, if you don't already know. And I—"

He cut his speech off short, for at that moment a tongue of flame was seen to shoot high up in the air; this was quickly followed by a stentorian cry of—

"Fire—fire!"

Then the alarm bells pealed forth their wild notes of warning.

The constables hastened their steps a little. They would get rid of their prisoners as soon as possible, and then go to the fire.

"Fire—fire!"

Clang—clang—clang! Clang—clang! Clang—clang—clang! So pealed the bell.

And then, from far up the street, came the rattle and roar of the rapidly-moving wheels of fire engines and hook-and-ladder trucks.

Drawing back a little, the party halted to see it pass.

"It's Hook and Ladder No. 2," said one of the constables.

And so it was.

"Make her hum, my hearties. No. 2 is always on hand, and always first at a fire. Make her buzz, boys!"

With whirling wheels—so swiftly they revolved—No. 2 flashed by like a meteor; and leading the way, trumpet in hand, was her old foreman—Ned Newcomb!

Ashton reeled and gasped for breath. He had surely seen Ned Newcomb! But alive or dead?

Was it Ned Newcomb, in flesh and blood, or was it his spirit, come back to haunt him?

He asked no questions; his guilty heart made him afraid to.

A half hour after, and he was behind bolts and bars, a prisoner.

Meanwhile Hook and Ladder No. 2 had swept onward to the scene of the fire, and, as she and her gallant company had ever done, carried off all the honors that were won. But to the crowd that speedily gathered there was an object of greater interest than the fire—and that was Ned Newcomb, flying here, there, and everywhere, performing wonders himself, and, by his spirited orders, inciting every member of his company to do the same.

The people gazed at Ned in an awe-struck manner. Some shrank from him when he came near but others, more bold, put out their hands and touched him lightly when he passed.

They could not understand the mystery surrounding his appearance, but they knew it was Ned Newcomb, and when at last the fire was vanquished, there was given a hearty cheer for the hero of so many fires—a cheer that was heard from one extreme of the village to the other.

And then the people dispersed to their homes to spend the remainder of the night in puzzling over the mystery surrounding Ned.

CHAPTER XXIV.

AND FINAL.

The curious people of Eagleton were not to be called upon to rack their brains for any great length of time.

The next morning was the one appointed for the term of court at which Ned's trial was to have taken place. When the court opened Ned was on hand. His case had been placed first on the docket, and it was entered upon at once.

Reynolds was carried into the courtroom on a cot. His testimony cleared Ned at once, and then such a shout went up as was never heard before in that place.

"You've got down all I said about Ashton and Murdock?" said Reynolds, with a bitter smile.

"Yes."

Then the physician claimed the judge's attention. Reynolds was a dying man, he said; it would only be proper to take his ante-mortem statement.

This was done. Reynolds charged Ashton and Murdock with having poisoned him, and on their being led in, pointed them out at once.

Fixing his glowing eyes on the murderous pair, the dying man hissed:

"You've killed me, curse you, but it's cost you pretty dear. Had you acted squarely with me you would not have been here to-day. But you tried to put me out of the way, and now —ha-ha-ha!—if I could only live long enough to see it—you'll be hung by the neck until you are dead—dead—dead!"

He paused for a minute to catch his breath, and then went on:

"You poisoned me once, but I hang you. I'd rather die of poison than by stretching hemp, any day. If there is such a thing as a man's spirit coming back I'll be on hand when you're hung, to jibe you, to mock you, to whisper my curses in your ears, so that you can't say your prayers."

He paused again, gasped for breath, opened his lips to speak again—but his jaws stiffly closed, his eyes took on a set expression, his frame settled heavily on the cot—and he was dead!

During the last week of that term, Ashton was placed on trial, as was also his companion, Murdock. After a consultation between all the interested parties, it was agreed not to bring forward the charge of conspiracy against Ned's life, but that they should be tried on the more grave charge of murder, in having caused the death of Reynolds.

During the trial, of course much that related to their fiendish machinations against Ned was brought to light, and had weight with the jury, in whose hands the lives of Ashton and Murdock were held.

The verdict was: "Murder in the first degree, but, on account of youth, recommending him to mercy."

So the murderers escaped the gallows, although receiving the scarcely less severe sentence of—"imprisonment for life."

Now that the dark cloud was cleared from Ned's character, and it became known that in a few months he would fall heir to a snug little fortune, he found himself lionized by everybody.

But adversity had taught him how to distinguish true friends from those attracted by the glitter of wealth and social position, and though he accepted the proffered hands of many, it was in a cold manner. He accepted as personal friends only those who had appreciated him and had treated him properly in the dark days of his adversity.

Old Sal Newcomb had reason, as long as she lived, to be glad that she had befriended the child who—by the foolish provision of a cranky old man's will—had been left destitute until he became of age.

The day after the trial Mr. Weaver called to see Ned, and frankly apologized for having suspected him.

"I say it now—that I would have prosecuted you as a duty," said that gentleman. "But in spite of all that, my heart bled for you, and I should have been sorry had you been convicted."

"I know it, sir," said Ned. "Mr. Porter has told me of your generous offer of paying a lawyer to defend me against your charge. Say no more, sir, if you please."

"I have a little more to say, which I mean to get out at once. It is this—the position of bookkeeper being now vacant, will you accept it?"

Ned wanted time to consider, and to consult Mr. Porter. He would give Mr. Weaver his answer the next day.

"Mr. Newcomb:—I have just heard all about you, and I could hardly believe it, so strange does it all seem. I knew you were innocent from the first, and told papa so; he felt very bad about it, and I think, in the bottom of his heart, felt that you did not do it. He is very glad, I know, that your innocence is proved. He told me he was going to offer to make you book-keeper at the works, and you must not refuse.

"From your friend,

"Winnie Weaver."

Ned received this note about an hour after parting from Mr. Weaver. Whether it had any weight with him we will not presume to say, but certain it is that his answer to Mr. Weaver next day, was that he accepted that gentleman's offer with many thanks for his kindness.

And now, our tale draws to a close. Ned Newcomb has been a part of the author for some time, and it is with regret that he parts with the young, dashing, brave foreman of Hook and Ladder No. 2. Perhaps this would not be so were Ned, and Joe Parker, and all the rest, simple creations of his imagination; which is not the case.

The village of Eagleton did exist, and does still; so does Ned Newcomb; and Joe Parker; and Mr. Weaver; and Winnie Weaver; and the Iron Works; and Hook and Ladder No. 2.

Yes, they all exist, although one may cease to exist before long. We refer to a recent rumor that Winnie Weaver will soon pass from existence (under that name) by becoming Mrs. Ned Newcomb.

[THE END.]

Read "ON DECK; OR, THE BOY PILOT OF LAKE ERIE," by Allyn Draper, which will be the next number (229) of "Pluck and Luck."

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